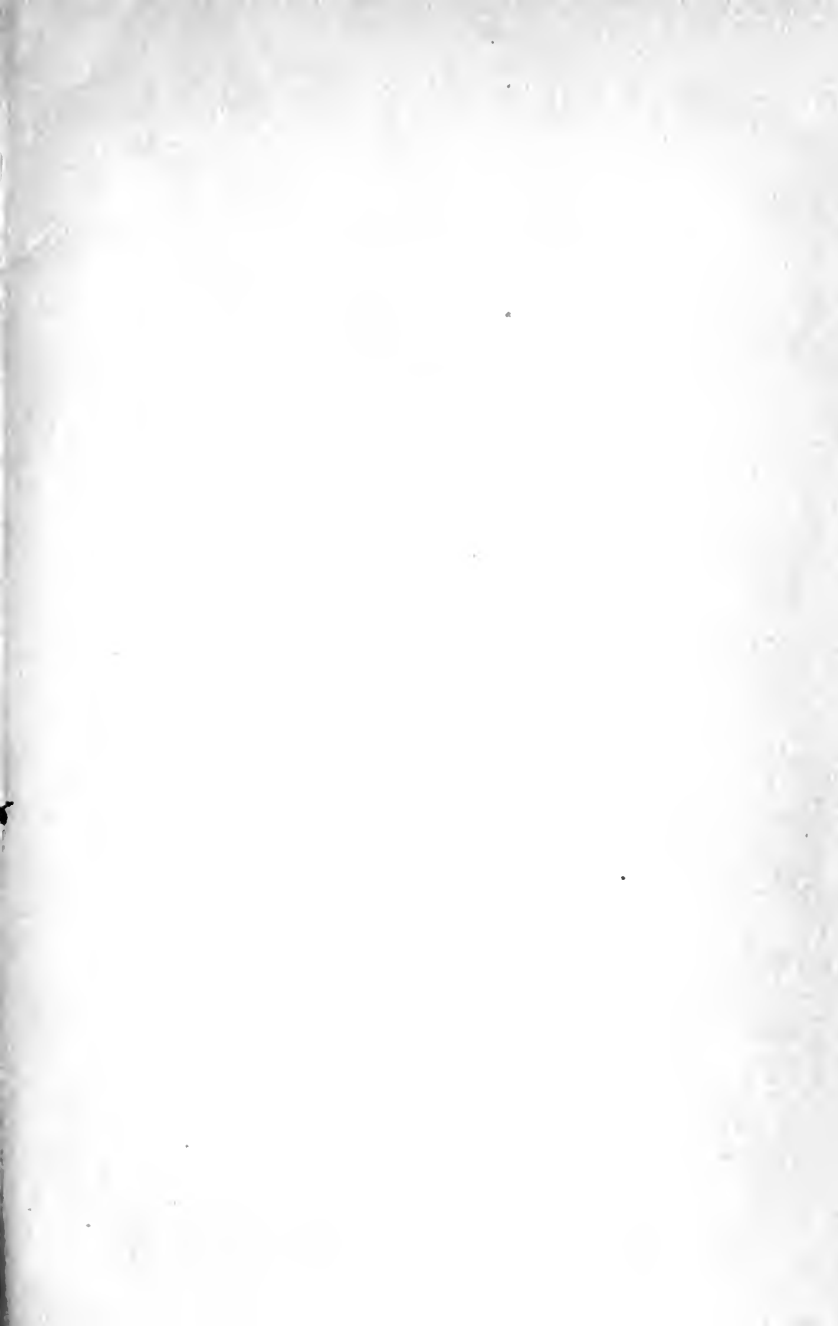


THE STRANGE FAMILY

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The Strange Family

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AMERICA
PHYLLIS—AND A PHILOSOPHER

THE
STRANGE FAMILY

BY
E. H. LACON WATSON

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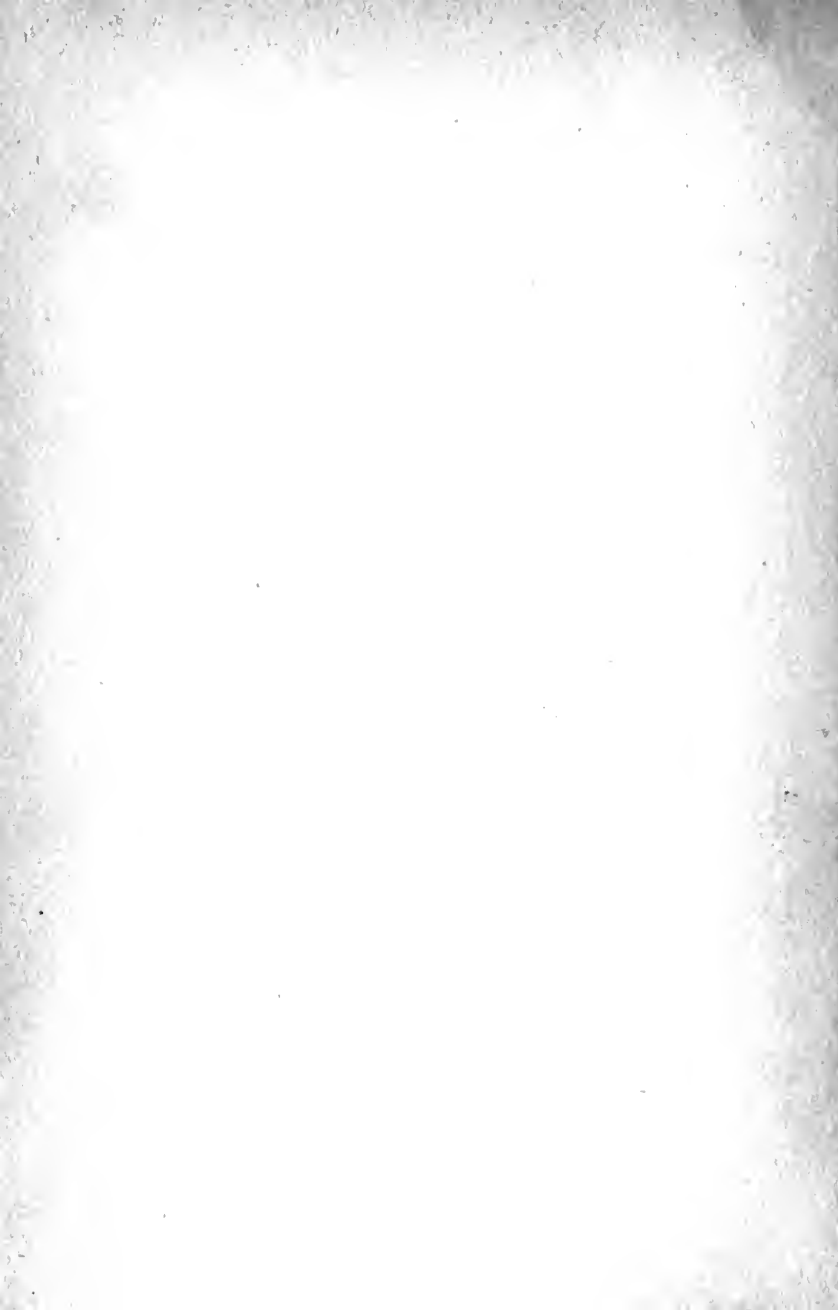
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The Strange Family

Book I



I

APPROACHING the village of Ashe from the south (which you might elect to do either from Duncote on the hill opposite, or from the small town of Mister-ton a few miles further westward beyond the village of Bingley) you could see in those days from some little distance the white stucco-fronted rectory, standing not without dignity on a slight eminence, with the spire of the parish church close beside it, thrusting itself skyward through the surrounding trees. And when you had climbed the ascent and passed along the road that ran between the rectory stables and the well-kept churchyard, the forge came into view on your right hand.

Possibly it may be so still, but it is a long time now since I went along that road—once so familiar that it seemed almost a part of myself. Sometimes I feel that I should like to know whether the trees have sprung up and hidden the old house that sheltered me for the first eighteen years of my life, and whether the forge still stands there, blackened with smoke and rather solitary, on your right hand just after you pass the trim stone wall that fences in the churchyard.

It stood by itself just at the corner of the two roads—the main road leading to Fleckney and the smaller by-road that turned down through the main part of the village and led eventually to Willoughby and beyond. I suppose the original builder had selected that site in order to secure two lines of passing traffic

for the smithy. In itself Ashe was an unimportant place. There was only a sprinkling of houses out on the Fleckney road—a few facing the forge, and one or two scattered cottages down by the railway cutting and the bridge. The Midland Railway ran through Ashe, but did not deem it worthy of a station. The nearest was at Ockington, distant a mile and a half if you went across the fields by the mill, and some three miles if you went round by the Willoughby road.

This road to Willoughby made the chief street of the village. Down the hill to the right it went, past the east end of the parish church, and soon there was quite a reasonable show of thatched cottages, and shops where they kept sweets in big glass bottles, and a few oranges in the window, and perhaps (in one or two instances) even such things as boots and shoes, bacon and cheese. Three public-houses there were in all, and a baker, who also owned the mill that was a landmark for some miles round, and a butcher, whose house was one of the first on the left hand after passing the rectory, and even old Lincoln, the bootmaker, who turned out all my boots while I still lived at home—and very stout boots they were too. Then there was John Arnold, the carpenter, whose workshop was always a pleasant place to haunt; and also a wheelwright (up at the far end of the village) whose name I have forgotten for the moment, with a yard full of stacked timber roughly sawn into suitable shape for his work. That was a fascinating place, with generally an old cart or waggon being repaired, and one or two more drawn up on the grass outside to await their turn.

But the forge was the really important institution. To my sister Elsie and myself, going out for our afternoon walk with Miss Mooney, it was difficult to get past that corner without spending a few minutes in watching the smith at work. Walks in our youth were

dull affairs. We ploughed more or less patiently along the muddy Midland lanes, while Miss Mooney raked a kindly but unimaginative mind for fragments of half-forgotten fairy tales that had solaced her own youth, or tried to awake our interest in reminiscences of her school-days. But it generally happened that we were permitted to stop for a while at the forge on the way home. It was a sort of Home of Mystery, that sooty building. At the best it was always dark in there. The dull glow of the embers, seen dimly through the open door among the shadows, the white heat of the iron and the glorious shower of sparks that flew in all directions when it was laid on the anvil and hammered roughly into shape, the laboured panting of the bellows—all these were a joy to watch. At any rate I used to enjoy it. What Elsie thought, I probably never knew: Elsie was always something of an enigma to me, even in those days.

Being the Canon's only son, I was permitted sometimes to blow the bellows. Elsie, to the best of my recollection, remained outside—and indeed the starched white dresses she wore in those days would have been most unsuitable in that grimy open shed. But I remember old Waring, the smith, making her a delightful set of Lilliputian fire-irons—tongs, poker, and shovel—which I envied exceedingly for some years. Waring was a master craftsman in his way, extraordinarily clever with his large, clumsy-looking hands. He made some iron candlesticks for Ashe church that were the talk of the countryside in those days.

II

This was old Waring, who died some time in the 'seventies and was succeeded at the forge by his son. There had always been a Waring at that forge, and indeed at the earlier forge which had now been turned

into a small dwelling-house in the street beyond the Blue Boar. There had been Warings in Ashe for some hundreds of years: the name was decipherable on ancient and lichen-covered stones in the churchyard, and in the earliest pages of the parish register. The family took some pride in the tradition. So long as a Waring remained above ground capable of wielding a sledge, there should be a Waring at Ashe forge. The dynasty must never be allowed to perish. Not that there seemed much likelihood of that then.

The death of old Waring is one of the first important events that remain stamped upon my memory. I have a distinct recollection of hearing the church bell tolling as we sat upstairs in the schoolroom, and of Miss Mooney explaining that it was for old Mr. Waring, and of looking out of the window a little later (it commanded a partial view of the churchyard through a belt of trees) and seeing what looked like an interminable procession of black figures slowly filing along the narrow path towards the main door of the church. I suppose I must have been then about seven years old.

A new Waring succeeded to his place, the second of five stalwart sons, who had all graduated at the Ashe forge before passing out into the great world to spread the healthy gospel of hard work. I never quite knew why Andrew, who was the second son, came into the line of succession, but I fancy the eldest son had predeceased his father a few years before. I believe I can even vaguely recollect him singing in the church choir. Anyway, it was Andrew and Jonathan, his only son, a boy not more than twelve months older than myself, who now came to take up their abode in the jasmine-covered cottage adjoining Ashe forge.

It was in Andrew's reign that the forge really came to mean so much to me. I was free of it from the beginning of his tenancy, for Andrew had married

one of the rectory servants before setting out to make his living elsewhere. Perhaps Mary's influence had something to do with his return. Or perhaps he may have been hankering after cricket.

'Andrew Waring ought to be useful in the parish,' said my father one morning at breakfast. 'He'll put the cricket club on its legs again. He used to bowl for the county before he went to London.'

And of course he did. If you are a follower of cricket it is possible that you may even now remember his name, though, being a Leicestershire man, and Leicester not then being a first-class county, he may not have met with his share of public appreciation. But when he first came to Ashe he had the relics of a considerable reputation. I believe he used to be the fastest bowler of his day, and he was practically tireless: he could keep on for the better part of a summer's day without sensibly losing his pace. In the past he had enjoyed a few notable triumphs—there was that celebrated occasion, recorded in the books, when he sent back five of the best Surrey bats for less than twenty runs. But he was past his best when I knew him—or possibly the men at headquarters had forgotten his former prowess. I think he only turned out twice for the county after his return.

Miss Mooney, who always acted as a sort of unofficial aide-de-camp to my father in parochial affairs, expressed the liveliest satisfaction.

'That will be nice, Canon. That is just what you were wanting, I know. I think Andrew will be quite charming. An acquisition. And Mary, too—you remember Mary, who used to be housemaid here ages and ages ago. Dear me, how time does fly! What a pretty girl she was when they were married!' Thus Miss Mooney, who never lost an opportunity of voicing an obvious sentiment.

'I looked in to see them yesterday,' she went on a

moment later. 'She's hardly altered at all. And they have such a delightful boy.'

'Miss Mooney,' said my father, in his quiet way, 'you were always an enthusiast.'

'Oh, but I am sure he is, Canon.' Miss Mooney rarely addressed my father by any other name, and most of the parish had picked up the same habit. 'His name is Jonathan. I wish we had a David for him. Perhaps we can find one, some day. I mean to have him in the choir. I'm sure he can sing splendidly. He has quite blue eyes, just like Mary's were. Almost violet in some lights.'

The Canon, as she called him, sipped his tea with a gentle, rather dreamy smile. He was, I suppose, nearly seventy even then, for he had married late in life, when he was getting on for sixty. My mother had died less than a year after I was born, leaving him a widower with two small children—and the indefatigable Miss Mooney. This excellent lady, I believe, had been half governess, half friend in my mother's family: she had been on a visit to Ashe rectory when the fatal illness came, and she had stayed on to look after the two children, and the servants, and the parish clubs, and indeed everything domestic or parochial that she could contrive to draw within her wide-spreading embrace. She may have been fifty-five or six years old, perhaps more. After the fashion of those days, she wore a white-frilled cap on her head and carried the keys of innumerable cupboards in a bunch at the waist of her black dress. I don't believe I ever saw her in colours. Among her other duties she assisted Miss Spiller, the village schoolmistress, in training the choir and playing the organ in church. But it must be admitted that she was not a great musician, and she would delegate this particular office to any strange visitor who wished to try her hand.

'We certainly want to strengthen the choir,' said

my father. 'And a pair of blue eyes, almost violet in some lights, will no doubt have their value. Are you going to try this young paragon to-night?'

Miss Mooney, I think, really enjoyed being gently chaffed in this way. Looking back, I suspect her now of deliberately playing for it, so that the Canon (whom she idolised) might enjoy a few moments' relaxation from the cares of his small parish. She would sacrifice herself cheerfully to give him a moment's holiday: she did not mind making herself out more foolish than she was if it would give him the smallest pleasure. For I suppose he did enjoy the quiet touch of humour for which she so often supplied the opportunity.

'Oh, Canon, you know I didn't mean it that way.'

'Well, well, I suppose the young fellow is coming up this evening?'

'I asked Andrew if he could. Willie Lane is coming too, and Tom Sanders.'

My father was silent for a few minutes. He had, it must be confessed, an absent-minded manner. Sometimes there was so long an interval between question and answer that it became difficult to remember what the subject of discussion had been. But Miss Mooney seldom failed him in this way.

'Send the young fellow in to me when you have finished with him, if you will be so kind,' said my father at last.

I had a curious premonition at the time, or is it only that I am reading something into my mind that came later. I seem to remember his face, with the eyes half veiled as he let them rest on me with that curious introspective look that was common with him whenever he was formulating some plan for the future. I can see the big dining-room table again, with the four of us seated round it, mathematically equidistant from each other, Miss Mooney eternally busied with

tea-cups and half hidden behind a huge copper urn of hot water, my father opposite, faced by a large piece of cold boiled bacon, Elsie and myself dutifully eating what was placed before us and rarely speaking unless some one asked us a question. Miss Mooney may have had her weaknesses—she used to let us come with her in her morning visits to the store-room and pilfer currants and raisins out of the big brown jars, and she would even allow us sometimes to suck sweets in church, making believe that they were merely cough lozenges—but she brought us up with a reasonable strictness, suitable to the times.

III

It was a question whether I was to go to school.

As for me, I was not sure whether I wanted to go or not. Like most boys, I preferred the normal. I had no sort of desire then to stand out from my fellows in any way—at all events at first. I suppose there was a streak of ambition latent within me somewhere, but I was content that it should remain hidden for the present. I wanted to be on an equality with my contemporaries, but no more. To be educated at home was to stand confessed a weakling, unfit for the battle of life without careful nursing, and it was unpleasant to have to admit so much. At the same time, I could not help feeling that I should probably have a rough time of it at a big school. I was abnormal physically, and perhaps it was wise in my father to recognise the fact openly. I had always been very small and undeveloped for my age, and it looked as though I might grow up permanently lame. I escaped that fate in the end, but for some years I retained distinct traces of a limp in the left leg. I did not lose it entirely until about my second year at Cambridge.

I often wonder now what effect it would have had

on my character if I had been passed through the ordinary mill, with other sons of squires and country clergymen and the like of my own epoch. I suppose I should have gained something that I do not possess, and never shall ; and also that I retain a good deal that a public school would have surely ground out of my system. I am not now posing either as opponent or advocate of that much-discussed institution. The British Public School is not so universally admired to-day as it was in the glorious past. It has had to live down that unfortunate remark by the great Duke of Wellington, for few things are more damaging than a hint of over-praise. I have heard men say (commonly, I admit, those who have not been educated at one of them) that Winchester and Eton, Harrow and Charterhouse breed a dull uniformity of incompetence, exceptionally irritating to the decently trained, scientific mind. They are but levelling machines, apt to prove fatal to any youth who may have been dowered at birth with a spark of original genius. Out that will go, to a certainty, if its presence chance to be detected—unless indeed the owner is of a singularly tough breed. Even mere talent is as likely as not to find itself crushed, snubbed, diverted into useless or unremunerative channels. And then, are there not in addition other dangers ?

I suppose it must have been several mornings later, soon after Elsie and I had settled down to our morning's work with Miss Mooney in the old schoolroom upstairs, that Jane, the housemaid, came up with a message from below.

'The Canon wants to see Master Rudolf in the study,' she said.

Rudolf ! That was my name. What they would have made of it at a public school if they had chanced to get hold of it, I don't know. Rudolf Strange ! I suppose my poor mother must have been a romantic

at heart. But it seemed perfectly natural to me then : it was not until several years later that I began to realise that a name like mine went with knights of the Middle Ages and battlemented castles. Not until quite recently did I perceive that it might, after all, be useful to possess a name slightly out of the common.

So long as we are too young to be quite sure of ourselves we strive to assimilate ourselves to the rest of our companions as much as possible. It is only when we begin to find our feet in the great world that we think of making use of such abnormalities as we have left.

My father was standing by the fire, leaning against the mantelpiece and gazing down into the blazing coals with an air of abstraction. I think this must have been his favourite attitude : I almost always discovered him in this position when he sent for me to discuss anything. And it generally took some little time before he began. He had lived so long by himself, I suppose, that a certain absent-mindedness had grown upon him.

I came and stood by him, warming my hands at the fire, for it was a chilly morning and the schoolroom upstairs was never kept too warm. I did not care how long he remained lost in thought. And at last he seemed to wake and discover my presence, and let his hand rest on my head.

‘ Ah, my boy ! I wanted to see you. Yes, I think it ’s time you had a companion of about your own age.’

‘ Oh ! ’ I said, not quite sure whether the feeling of disappointment that had crept into my voice was real or partially feigned. ‘ Then I ’m not to go to school ? ’

‘ H’m. Do you really want to go ? ’

‘ I don’t know,’ I said truthfully. The fact was, sometimes I wanted to go very much indeed—for example, just after I had been reading *Tom Brown’s School Days*. And at other times I felt terribly

nervous of the whole thing: as though I were a tiny piece of delicate crockery about to be thrown into a raging torrent. I might come through all right, and it was conceivable that I might be polished in the process; but it seemed infinitely more probable that I should emerge chipped or broken to pieces.

'Well, we need not decide yet. There'll be time enough for that in a few years, when you may have grown a bit. Tell me, what do you think of young Waring?'

I did not quite follow him at first, because I already thought of Waring, junior, by his Christian name. Indeed, I had made acquaintance with the newcomers a long time before Miss Mooney had paid her official call upon them. I regarded the forge almost as part of our personal property, and when I discovered a boy of about my own age, delightfully grimy, and wearing a real leather apron, working at the bellows, we soon arrived at a sort of understanding.

'Do you mean Jonathan?' I replied at last. 'I like him awfully. We went right along by the brook yesterday as far as the old bridge, and found a kingfisher's nest.'

'Ah! You've made friends already, then?'

'Rather. And I like Andrew too. He lets us work at the forge by ourselves when he's not there. I nearly made a horseshoe the other day.'

'Jonathan helped you, I expect.'

'He showed me how, at first,' I confessed.

My father considered a while, still gazing into the fire.

'We'll see how it works,' he said, almost to himself. 'They are a good stock. I'll see what Waring thinks on the subject. Now you'd better go back to Miss Mooney and do some work.'

I left the fire regretfully. When I got back to the schoolroom I announced the news at large.

'Jonathan's coming here,' I said. 'And I'm not to go to school. Father's going to teach us both in the study.'

I had always rather a tendency to leap to conclusions.

Chapter II

Culminating in a Flood

I

It was some time before my prophecy was fulfilled. Jon and I used to go about a good deal together from that time onwards, but he did not at once begin to share my lesson hours in the study. I was not, in fact, considered old enough yet to be promoted from the schoolroom and Miss Mooney and the study of elementary history and geography out of a row of prehistoric books that had been, I suppose, used by Miss Mooney's own unfortunate teachers when she was still a girl. Difficult to imagine Miss Mooney as a girl, but it helped to see her name in scrawling letters over the front page of some of those books. I felt that I could see her when I looked at those untidy signatures.

'She couldn't write any better than you,' I said to Elsie, in some contempt. 'I expect she was an awful little fool then.'

Which made Elsie quite angry. She always stood up for old Mooney. And no doubt she was perfectly right in doing so. Recalling those years, I can only marvel at the persistent and unwearying kindness of that excellent woman. I never remember seeing her even ruffled in temper, though, Heaven knows, she had excuses enough. To tell the truth, I burned to get rid of her and those long mornings in the schoolroom. I thought them beneath my dignity. I ought to be learning Latin and Greek, and other such subjects that were taught in schools. But the order had

gone forth that I was to wait until I was ten years old. I had to endure with what patience I could find. Orders were orders in those days, and it was no use trying to accelerate matters by petition.

But Jon and I (I called him by that name from the first) spent as much time together as we could. It was he who taught me all I knew of the usual boys' games. We made bows and arrows out of the hazelnut trees in the rectory garden, and he showed me how to cut whistles from those tall umbelliferous weeds by the cucumber frames (I never can remember the names of these things), and even to manufacture a sort of pop-gun from the wood of the elder-bushes in the hedge of the kitchen garden.

Two things seem, on looking back, to have obsessed my youth—weapons of precision, more or less, and means of locomotion. We unearthed the old family perambulator from the rectory coach-house, where it had lain undisturbed for the last five years or more, and amused ourselves by getting inside and letting it run at its own pace down the main village street. Jon, who was an ingenious fellow, contrived to steer the unwieldy monster by means of a pole, which also acted in emergencies as a brake.

That ancient perambulator lasted a remarkably long time, considering the arduous nature of the work it had to do. It had never been handsome. In the days of my babyhood, or Elsie's, when it was originally bought, perambulators were not the luxurious, silent, rubber-tyred machines that you may now see any fine morning being pushed along Kensington High Street and into the Gardens. Ours had three wheels, with solid wooden spokes and tyres of iron. It took a good deal to upset its equilibrium. But there was a sharp turn at the bottom of the village hill that tested the steersman rather severely, and we had some glorious smashes into the brick wall that skirted the Clarkes'

garden. Then Waring, senior, used to come gallantly to the rescue, and perform wonders of craftsmanship repairing our front wheel, free of all charge.

I never came to serious harm on these occasions, lame as I was. But many a time dear old Miss Mooney tackled my father on the subject, almost tearfully.

'I'm so afraid there'll be a really serious accident some day, Canon,' she would say. 'You see, it's not quite as though he were an ordinary sort of boy.'

Whenever she said this I used to feel an actual physical pang. In a sense I wanted above everything to become an ordinary sort of boy, and it seemed to be out of my reach: I could devise no way of reaching so glorious an eminence with that limp of mine. And yet, at the same time, I felt in a dim and hazy fashion that there might be something in being set apart.

'It's all right,' I explained in a hurry. 'We just tried to-day how fast she would go, and Jon couldn't quite get her round in time. She only tipped over quite gently.'

'Oh!' said Elsie reproachfully. 'It went a most awful bang. I was watching.'

'I'm sure it must be dangerous,' repeated Miss Mooney.

But my father only made an impatient sound, rather as though he were frightening hens out of the road. It was one of the few things that disturbed his customary placidity, this insistence on danger. It must be confessed that Miss Mooney was always of a fearful and timorous disposition. She expected burglars to break into the house every night, just as she looked for the worst every time the Canon got a slight cold in the head.

'I don't want the boy to grow up like a hot-house plant,' he said. 'He'll have to fight his way in the world just like any one else.'

‘Poor child!’ Miss Mooney looked at me with pitying eyes, as though so puny a creature could never be expected to make anything of a show in the battle of life. I expect I coloured as I bent down over my plate.

‘Nonsense!’ said the Canon, but quite good-humouredly. ‘A few knocks won’t hurt the boy. Young Waring will see he doesn’t come to harm.’

II

Memory has a trick of foreshortening the past, but it must have been shortly after this that I left Miss Mooney and the lessons which I shared with Elsie and descended to the study for what I proudly regarded as real work. Miss Mooney, who was incurably sentimental, lamented aloud that the two children should have to be separated so early. But I do not think that either of us felt it nearly as much as she supposed we might.

I do not mean to say that Elsie and I were bad friends. But we never had much in common. She was two years the elder, and I think in her heart she always looked down on me. From quite early times she had a way of assuming an air of superiority that galled my youthful spirit.

Possibly we saw rather too much of each other. If I had gone to school I dare say the mere fact would have thrown a sort of glamour over the home life. Coming home for the holidays! That was an experience I never went through; nor did I know the steady and inevitable approach of the day for going back again. Whereby, no doubt, I missed something. But somehow or other Elsie and I had never been really intimate—not even in those first years when we used sometimes to dig in our little gardens side by side, while Miss Mooney or some other guardian sat in the summer-house hard by.

And it annoyed me to see the way in which she treated my new friend, or rather the way in which she refused to have anything to do with him at all. Almost from the day he first came she ceased to join in our games. I don't know that we, or I at any rate, exactly encouraged her to join. But in a very short space of time it seems to me that we were ranged, so to speak in opposite camps. Jon and I were outlaws, and gloried in the fact: we used to stray where we liked about the village, or down by the brook in the meadows, pursuing our own devices, or hanging about the forge. That was, of course, out of school hours. For he still attended the village school, where, indeed, Miss Spiller had taught him pretty much all she knew in the way of mathematics.

I remember Waring, the father, telling us so in the forge, when the Canon had asked him what he meant to do with the boy.

The smith scratched his head ruminatively.

'Don't rightly know, Canon.' Andrew Waring never lost his broad Midland accent. His 'rightly' was as near to 'roightly' as it well could be.

'He seems to be getting a bit beyond them here,' said my father.

A chuckle was heard in the smith's throat.

'Miss Spiller come up to me last week,' he admitted, 'and said there weren't much more in the way of sums, like, as she could learn Jonny.' His grin broadened slowly. 'I reckon she wouldn't be sorry to see the back of him at the school. He's a proper bit of mischief at times.'

'Well, Waring,' said my father, 'have you any objection to my taking him in hand a bit myself? Might make it easier for my own boy here, in a way.'

Waring's honest face reddened visibly, even in the dusky light of the forge.

' 'Twould be too much, Canon,' he said.

‘Trust me, I won’t spoil the lad.’

‘Tain’t that, Canon. I’d trust you right enough. But the lad ’ll be a noosance, like, up at the rectory.’

‘Well, well, I’ll take my chance of that. No, Waring, it’s as much for the sake of my young colt here as yours. They’ll run better in a pair. Easier for both of them, and for me too. Think it over, now, and let me know. Monday next I shall be ready to begin with the boy.’ And he put his hand on my shoulder and turned away towards the village main street before Waring, who was never a quick speaker, could think of anything suitable to say.

‘There, my boy, what do you think of that?’ said my father, patting me gently on the shoulder as he spoke, and laughing to himself in a way he had when he thought he had done some one a good turn. He had a way of walking about the village with a reminiscent smile on his face. For they were good folk, these parishioners of his: there was a real mutual affection between him and them, and it was rare for him to take a walk in the village without doing a kindness to some one of them. It was his creed that there was plenty of good in our despised human nature, did we but take the trouble to look for it. Too many of us went about the world with protruded noses, sniffing for some sort of unpleasant odour, and generally finding it without much difficulty. Then we retired into ourselves, satisfied that our suspicions were justified.

‘Is he going to learn Euclid?’ I asked anxiously. For I had been introduced to the celebrated Alexandrian philosopher that same morning, and was not at all sure that I should really like him on a further acquaintance.

But I got no reply. The Canon was away, no doubt, already forecasting his new pupil’s career. He was a persistent dreamer. I dare say he was wondering even then whether it might not be a mistake. Was it

ever worth while to take a boy out of his own class, to 'educate him above his station'? There was a risk in it—always the risk of arousing aspirations that were difficult of realisation. The philanthropist might come a hopeless cropper unless he selected his subject with the greatest care.

But the Warings, after all, were as safe a family as any man could well hope to find. And I have no doubt also it came into his mind that I might need a spur.

The old man smiled, and sighed. Probably he would not live to see even the first results. But that did not matter. We planted our seed in the garden with a sound faith that some day green leaves would appear above the ground. Flower or fruit would come of it in good time.

'It takes one back again,' he said aloud. His pace quickened insensibly. 'Well, I ought to be able to do it. Forty years ago!' And he fell back into meditation.

I did not know then how much he had been in request as a teacher in the old days, when he had first come to Ashe, fresh from a college fellowship at Cambridge. For it was a college living. And the new rector had been very much in request then. I have heard Miss Mooney talk about him often enough when, according to her easy gossip, the old house was gay with all sorts of young men preparing for their various careers. I say 'all sorts,' but she was careful to stress the fact that the dear Canon (of course he was not a Canon then, but she could not bring herself to call him by any other name) could choose his pupils from the most aristocratic houses in the land.

'There was young Lord Melton,' she sighed, 'who's Lord Southwold now: he came into the earldom just after he left. And Mr. Wycherley—he'll succeed to the baronetcy some day, if he lives. And

Lord Anthony Fitzboyne—he was a son of the Marquess of Mullingar, you know : an Irish peer, my dear. They were all before I came here, of course, but I 've heard about them in the village.' And she gave a series of sage nods, as though to intimate that she knew a thing or two that those noble houses might prefer her to keep to herself.

Elsie always used to do her best to draw her out on this topic. She would cross-examine her on the one or two specimens of pupils whom she had seen in her time. But she could only remember one—young Burnett, who had come into great wealth. Inherited a brewery, or something of the sort.

'Hardly of the same class, of course,' she said. 'Not exactly county people, my dear, though extraordinarily popular, I believe. And his family offered the dear Canon anything—almost any sum you could mention'—her voice sank to an awed whisper—'if he could get him into Cambridge.'

'Did he?' asked Elsie, who had a way of keeping to the main point.

Miss Mooney nodded. 'I don't think the dear Canon ever failed with a pupil. He was a Double First.'

We were left with the comfortable conviction that no graduate possessed of that enviable distinction could by any possibility fail in anything he undertook.

III

It became a new world to me from the Monday morning that saw Jon come up to the rectory study for the first time to share my morning's work. A transfigured world, a theatre of adventure. Hitherto I had only seen him for a few scattered half-hours during the week : now I had him more or less to myself as soon as the morning's work was over.

Jon showed me a hundred things that could be done, even in Ashe, which I had always considered a place with no possibilities whatsoever. Was it not my own home, and therefore void of romance as an old shoe? Of course, I knew that there was a brook flowing round by the mill, but I had not realised that there might be fish in the stream. It was Jon who produced some hooks (he had gone over to Fleckney specially to buy them), and cut and trimmed hazel wands for rods, and manufactured lines, and showed me where to get worms for bait and, above all, where to find the best fish. I was never half the man with my hands that he was. Give him an old knife and a piece of wood, and he could do all sorts of things, while I could do nothing but litter the floor with chips and shavings, and probably cut myself into the bargain. He made a small yacht once out of an old piece of wood got from John Arnold, the village carpenter, and rigged it with part of an old shirt that he managed to get out of one of the servants—one of the Canon's, I suspect—and we used to sail it with fair success on the big pool just above the mill.

'I do hope they won't fall in,' said Miss Mooney, with great regularity, every time we went there. If we did, we contrived to scramble out and say nothing about it afterwards.

I confess freely that he was the leader all the time, and I merely followed. I regarded him as a sort of hero. He must have been four inches taller than I was, at least, and there could be no comparison between us then in bodily strength. But I limped after him, wherever he went, to the best of my ability. I know I envied him for innumerable things—even for his complexion, which was a healthy brown, whereas I could never manage even to acquire a decent tone of red, and for his eyes, which were a particularly dark shade of blue that one does not often see.

And in mathematics he certainly was something of a wonder. I am no particular good at them myself, and did not like them much in those days of early tuition, but Jonny progressed with a speed that fairly surprised his tutor. He seemed to assimilate everything at once, with astonishing ease. Give him a single explanation of any difficulty, and there never would be any further trouble over that particular point. He took what was said at the first attempt, and never seemed to want a repetition—which is the sort of thing that gladdens the heart of any teacher, especially when they have had to deal with pupils of a slower habit. I have an idea the Canon used to boast of him a little sometimes when he found himself in the company of brother clergymen who had also been through the Mathematical Tripos.

‘He has a natural turn for it,’ I remember hearing him say once in the drawing-room to old Winscombe, the archdeacon, who had come over, I suppose, on some tour of inspection. ‘One very rarely meets them with that extraordinary quickness of comprehension. Most boys are frightened of symbols. Young Waring was quite at home as soon as we started.’

‘Infant phenomena, infant phenomena!’ muttered old Winscombe. ‘He’ll disappoint you, my dear Strange. They always do. These fellows who start off like that never do any good when they come to pure mathematics.’

The Canon frowned anxiously.

‘True. Sometimes, I admit, I have known them like that—some of the most promising. Still, I do not fancy young Waring will fail in that respect.’

‘And what do you mean to do with him, in any case?’

That was always the puzzling question. What ought he to do about the lad’s future? I have no doubt myself that his intention was to send him up for

a scholarship in due course, at some college where they would look after his work. Not Trinity, where he might be swamped, nor one of the very small colleges, where they might not be able to do him justice. In all probability St. Michael's, where he had been himself and where he meant to send me.

But my father did not give away his intentions to any one. When asked questions of that kind he turned them aside gently by saying that it was too early to tell yet, but he thought it was worth while to give the lad a chance. He was never in the habit of thinking too far ahead.

'Excellent fellow, Strange, but unpractical,' I have heard Winscombe say. But then your archdeacon, even in those days, had to be a business man, and Winscombe prided himself on the fact that he answered all his voluminous correspondents the same day, and all on postcards or half-sheets of paper torn off the letters he received. He could barely understand a man who failed to map out his future with the careful accuracy of a surveyor—who would, indeed, have considered it a waste of time to do so. If we held life on a long lease it might be all very well, but which of us did? Not even a half-year's agreement! We might be bundled out at a moment's notice, our fairest schemes brought to nothing.

At the same time, a man could dream. And sometimes a kindly Providence allowed his dreams to come true.

IV

That next summer, and the summer after, Waring, senior, performed remarkable feats for Ashe against the surrounding villages at cricket. He could not play much during the week, except occasionally a little practice in the long summer evenings, but on the Saturday afternoons (to which cricket in that neigh-

bourhood was commonly restricted) he turned out regularly. For one thing, the Canon liked it.

There was a vein of old-world simplicity about my father. He did not know much about the game himself. In his college days games were games, not regarded too seriously, and I suspect a college team (and even the University Eleven sometimes, if the truth were told) was made up in a fashion that would send a cold shiver through one of our modern enthusiasts. His were days when boat captains thought nothing of putting in an untrained man at stroke half-way through the races if the heavy old tub did not seem to be travelling too well. But he liked to see a game of village cricket on the sloping field in front of the garden, where, to tell the truth, the wicket was not exactly suitable to a nervous batsman ; and he would entertain both teams after the match to a good sound supper.

The Ashe Eleven depended almost entirely on Waring himself. He fairly terrified the foe. Kindly fellow as he was, he did as little damage as a fast bowler well could—on that pitch. He was not one of those pestilent fellows who bang them down short and chance it. But there were days when he was all but unplayable. If there happened to have been a heavy rainfall during the week, every other ball would shoot dead, and the wicket would be spread-eagled before the bat came down.

Under his leadership Ashe became quite keen on the game. One man may do a great deal to popularise country cricket over a whole neighbourhood. Teams sprang up now in parishes where the sound of bat on ball had not been heard for years : strangers from the far side of the county began to send over challenges to home-and-home matches. Jon and I used to go down to join in the evening practice when he was fifteen and I a year younger. He had a fast slinging ball

himself, decidedly reminding you of his father's action, and he could bat quite fairly. He played in the team regularly that year.

I am almost ashamed to say that they gave me a place once or twice, though I could never have been worth much to the side. However, Jon's father had done his best for both of us by inculcating the rudiments of forward play: left shoulder well forward, left foot out to meet the ball, right foot the pivot on which to turn—unless you got a long hop a bit wide on the off side. Then you could step across if you liked. In old Waring's simple code there was no room for stepping back and across in order to hook a short one round to leg.

'Keep that there right foot quiet, Master Rudolf,' was his perpetual cry. And, indeed, I fear I was always more than a little inclined to draw away from a fast one on the leg side (small blame to me on that wicket!). Jon stood up to his father nobly. He never seemed to mind getting knocked about. A decidedly tough young customer, Jon, in those days.

I remember one notable match in which we distinguished ourselves rather above the ordinary. We heard a good deal about it, too, both before and after, for it was against a team brought over by young Burnett, one of our old pupils (the only one of whom Miss Mooney had any personal recollection), who had been in the Cambridge Eleven some five or six years before, and was a cricketer of real renown as well as a wealthy brewer. At that time he was supposed to be one of the best bats in the county. He brought over a fairly strong lot of players—his usual country-house team that he always used to take about after the schools broke up. I fancy he must have heard we were something better than the common run of village sides.

The match sticks in my mind particularly because

it was the first, so far as I recollect, in which I had seen a whole visiting team correctly turned out for the game. Ashe itself, except for Waring, Jon, and myself (when I happened to be included), never looked to the casual observer as though it were likely to put up much of a game. Most of our players, indeed, were content to take off their coats to the task—together with their collars, if they chanced to wear such things. John Arnold, the carpenter, whose slow, deceitful balls made such an excellent foil to Waring's express deliveries, invariably played in a bowler hat. I am not sure that the smith did not encourage this apparent simplicity, on the ground that it might inspire our opponents with that overweening confidence that sometimes precedes a fall.

Anyway, we beat the gaily apparelled visitors (I doubt if I had ever seen a real blazer before) by three runs, after a 'Titanic struggle. And Waring himself knocked Burnett's off stump out of the ground in each innings; which no doubt led to his invitation to play against Surrey at the Oval a fortnight later. He went, but the expectations of Ashe were not quite fulfilled. I suppose he must have been past his best days then—or possibly the Oval wicket, that paradise of batsmen, proved a little too good for him after the rectory meadow. But he played. It was his last appearance for the county.

v

It was in the following spring that we were bitten so severely with the craze for boat-building.

I think it must have been one of those boys' papers that flourished at that time from which we first caught the infection. It came out with full instructions to the amateur carpenter about making all sorts of useful furniture—a boat among them. Or rather a canoe. Personally, I confess I made nothing of a carpenter.

But Jon had almost a genius for it. And I could make shift to carry out his orders, or at all events to hold the tools for him until he asked for them.

I wanted a canoe as much as he did. It appealed so powerfully to the exploring instinct. And what was the good of having a river on the estate without being able to venture upon its surface and explore its hidden windings? Because, further down, by Willoughby and Stourton, where the stone quarries were, it became a veritable river, in places quite unjumpable. And at Ashe itself, after several days' rain, it would sometimes make a creditable show enough, coming down bank-high, or even overflowing altogether and flooding the surrounding country. Clearly a canoe was a possession to hold in readiness for some such occurrence as this.

So we scraped together what money we could, not without difficulty. Money was a commodity not too easily come by at the rectory. Indeed, as a general rule, we had no great need for pocket-money in those days. But Jon was all for getting good seasoned timber, and you couldn't get that for nothing. At least, John Arnold might have let us have some, but we agreed that it wouldn't be fair.

So I opened the new cash-box that Miss Mooney and Elsie had combined to give me at Christmas, and handed over the contents to the senior partner in the firm. And for the next few weeks we worked assiduously in the loft over the stable whenever we could get away from our lessons. It was most fascinating to see the thing growing under our hands.

'If the floods would only come out again!' I sighed aloud. It had been a barren year for floods, but what might we not do if the brook only repeated the glories of the past! Had we not seen the whole valley in front of the house a lake of water, in the middle of which, almost out of sight, a turbulent current swept

along all manner of rubbish, from branches of trees to dead fowls, or even sheep?

'They'll come right enough,' said the practical Jonathan, looking over his work with the eye of a craftsman. 'What we have to do is to finish before they do come. I've a mind they haven't laid her down strong enough in this paper of yours.'

And eventually he went down to the forge to get what he called a 'bit of iron work' to hold her together for'ard. He introduced several similar bits into the system of the vessel before she was finished. And then, with John Arnold's assistance, or rather with the conveniences of his workshop, we contrived to turn out a couple of rather unwieldy paddles.

The trouble came when we had to get the completed article out of that loft and down to the water. But Jon was certainly an ingenious fellow. He eased it down the steps leading up to the loft much as you may see brewers' men letting a big barrel of beer down into a publican's cellar, by taking a turn or two with the painter round one of the oaken posts supporting the roof. It was my job to see that she kept straight and did not slip off the steps and break the stable window. Unfortunately the painter was not long enough to let her all the way down, and she came the last few feet with a run, sending me on my back in the mud. But nothing of importance was damaged.

The next job was to get her down to the brook. We borrowed a sort of small trolley on wheels that we discovered at the back of the forge, and took her down by the Duncote road, after a vain attempt to carry her across the fields. It was hard work even then, but we were not to be beaten. With immense labour we launched our craft at last in the old sheep-washing pool. She actually carried us, and after a time we could paddle her about more or less where we wanted, though she certainly required humouring.

'She's meant for a sea-boat,' said Jon, looking her over with the eye of an expert. 'Didn't need to have made her that heavy, after all. But she'll last.'

'I wish we could get her right away,' I said, looking out to the far horizon. My dream was to navigate her down to the junction with the Trent, and so to the Humber and the North Sea. But for the present we had to be content with paddling her down to the shallows and back again. It was no use trying to get her past, over that long stretch of boulder-strewn gravel, until there was more water in the stream. We tied her up to the post of a fence by the Long Meadow, and awaited events. But even as far as we had gone it was great fun.

VI

And when the floods actually came we had some trouble in retrieving her at all. For those floods at Ashe had a way of coming with remarkable suddenness. Two or three wet days, and you would wake in the morning to find, when you looked out of your bedroom window, nothing visible but water and half-submerged trees from just below the cricket pitch to the hedge bordering Harrison's farm. Sometimes the village was cut off from Duncote and Misterton altogether by the direct road: the only way was to go round by the village street towards Willoughby, and then turn to the right in the hope that you might still be able to cross the brook by the new bridge. It was all the fault of the new system of drainage, said the conservative householder. In the old days, they asserted, there never used to be floods of this magnitude.

When at last we were able to get out, that spring afternoon, it was clear that the canoe had broken away from the post where we had tied it up. We waded

and splashed our way through the marshy meadows, keeping to the higher ground as far as possible, and looking carefully for any sign of her. There was none.

'She must have got caught up somewhere,' said Jon hopefully.

'She can't have gone altogether,' I chimed in. 'I don't believe she'd get through the bridge now.'

'Can't say. 'Tain't likely she'll have got that far. But she may have been swamped. Good job we took the paddles out.'

So I thought. We had the paddles with us, and they came in useful now for jumping the swollen ditches, particularly for me, who was not much of a jumper at the best of times. I scrambled along somehow. It was a journey of discovery down stream, fascinating enough in its way. And even if she had been swamped we ought to be able to recover her when the floods subsided again. Though it would mean losing the best chance of a real voyage we were likely to have for some time.

'There she is!' said Jon at last, pointing to something dark against the tall hedge that bounded the next field—which by now was nothing but a wide sheet of water. His sight was always keener than mine, but at last I made her out, apparently intact. The current must have taken her over the bank there, for the stream made a decided turn to the right just after passing the allotments. Then it swept along almost in a straight line till it came to the big new bridge on the Willoughby-Duncote road, quite half a mile further on.

'There'll be a bit of wading before we get hold of her,' announced Jon with finality. He began to remove his shoes and socks, which were already well sodden. And I propped myself on the stile by his side to follow his example.

‘ I ’ll go and get her,’ he said. ‘ You wait here and I ’ll bring her back.’

But that was not my idea at all. Paddling about in the water was a new adventure, and after all it was the glebe farm, and therefore in a sense I was lord of the manor and could do as I chose. As a rule I allowed him to be leader, but this was the biggest thing we had encountered yet, and I felt it was time to assert myself.

Jon rarely spent time in arguing.

‘ One ’s enough,’ he said briefly. ‘ No sense in two of us getting wet when one can do it. But you ’ll have to be careful not to let her get caught by the current. Pretty job I ’d have explaining things if you got carried off down stream by yourself.’

I laid my shoes (the socks inside them) carefully on the step of the stile, tucked up my trouser-legs as high as they would go, and stepped gingerly into the cold water.

‘ No need to get in over your knees,’ explained Jon, sitting there and continuing to shout advice and exhortation. ‘ Keep a bit more to your left there. You ’ll find yourself in a hole in one minute. There ! what did I say ? ’

I floundered up again, with a good deal of splashing and no cap. I had forgotten that gully leading down to the ditch. Jon had dropped off his stile and was coming after me, in case of accidents.

Now it should have been easy enough to get hold of the canoe with the end of my paddle, as I had meant to do, and pull it gently towards me until it was well out of the swirling eddy that kept it so firmly jammed against that tall hedge. But I was in a hurry : I wanted to have all the glory to myself, and here was Jon coming along in my wake as fast as he could, just because I happened to be a little lame and he was afraid of some accident happening. I reached out for the

craft quickly, and made a bad shot. The canoe swung round, eluding me: I thought for a moment it had escaped, and my heart missed a beat. I leaned forward as far as I dared, and just got my paddle on her stern. I could hold her, but that was all: the current seemed to have taken charge, and was slowly dragging her out of my reach. Nothing for it but to risk everything and try to jump on board.

I felt about with the paddle for a moderately sound take-off. That was all right! I had got on board somehow. We had built her more like a punt than a canoe, and she stood it all right, except for a violent rocking. I had to catch hold of the sides of the boat to steady her, leaving my paddle stuck fast in the clay of the ditch. And before I knew what had happened we had got fairly into the current and were drifting merrily down stream.

Jon was near enough to see what was going to happen. If we got away round the corner beyond that hedge he could clearly never catch up again. He made a wild jump and scramble, and went right in over his head before he knew where he was. But it was in the right direction, and he managed to catch hold of the canoe's stern when he came up. Then I caught him by the coat collar, and after some time got him in. It was no easy job either, in that craft. And now we had neither of us got a paddle. And there we were, twisting and turning in the swift brown stream, going rapidly down without any possibility of guidance, like a log.

'I say, we're off this time. I nearly got off by myself too.'

I felt elated, excited. Jon, apparently, did not. He was always the practical partner. Also, he was very wet—wetter even than I was.

'I wish we could get her out of this current,' he said.

But there seemed nothing in sight that we could grasp as we swept on. We tried to get her head round, paddling with our hands, but the current was too strong, it never gave us a chance. And soon, beyond the next field, was the Duncote road, and the big red bridge spanning the brook. Ordinarily there was nothing but a trickle of water passing underneath, dancing over the pebbles; now the arch was all but blocked up by the turbid stream. Some way off, by the turning to Ockington, a light cart was splashing busily through the muddy ruts, coming at a good pace.

I don't think it occurred to me at first that we were in any particular danger. But that red brick arch looked menacing.

'I say,' I said once more, 'how are we going to get through?'

But Jon was standing up in the stern, waving his hands. I had all my work cut out to keep the boat from upsetting.

'That's father,' he cried, and put his hands to his mouth, shouting. 'He's bringing Uncle Joseph back from Ockington station. Now hold tight. We shall be into it in a minute.'

I was crouched in the bottom of the boat, facing him, doing my best to keep her steady. So I couldn't see the big red bridge looming up nearer and nearer. I heard the galloping of a horse, and saw Jon suddenly crouch down and catch hold of the sides.

'Stand up!' he called to me. 'Catch hold of the parapet as you go under. Make a jump for it.'

But just as I scrambled up in obedience, we struck a submerged post or something of the kind, and in a moment I was gasping for breath in the rushing water. That was the last I remembered for a considerable space of time.

*Chapter III**Adoption*

I

THERE is a blank, or at least a haze, in my memory over the months that immediately succeeded. For a considerable time I ceased to take anything like an active part in the affairs of Ashe and its rectory. I lay upstairs in the best room (which had a south aspect, and was thought more suitable to one in my grave state than my own little chamber, away in the servants' quarter over the kitchen) and took only a fitful interest in life for the rest of that spring and a good deal of the summer. From time to time Miss Mooney assured me that it was only by a miracle I yet lived. She must have spent a great deal of her time in that room, sitting by the side of the great four-post bed, with its curious canopy of curtains dependent, as it were, from a circular sounding-board over my head. Even Elsie came in sometimes and sat there for a short time. But Elsie was always rather restless, and never very tolerant of sickness.

Dear old Miss Mooney ! I think of her very kindly now, for the sake of those days. And now she has been lying in Ashe churchyard for how many years ? I have to search in my memory for something by which to fix the date, and find it a difficult matter, so much is my recollection of her overlaid by fragments of remembered conversation that will persist in obtruding themselves whenever I think of her. For she had a tongue that went almost ceaselessly, though, unlike most chatterers, she was rarely known to say anything unkind. Her talk was the natural outpouring of a heart ever ready to bow down in simple admiration. Ashe was the most wonderful village in the Midlands—possibly in the world—and the majority of its inhabitants were the elect of the human race. What

parish in the country could match the various church officers—old Nicholas Harrison, for example, the rector's churchwarden, or Bagley, the parish clerk, who also acted as our gardener, or John Arnold, the bearded carpenter who had such a wonderful tenor, and sang in the choir and at village concerts, besides being so useful in the cricket matches? As for the Canon—Miss Mooney admitted that words failed her. Absurd as it seemed, she confessed her inability to deal adequately with his virtues.

She pervaded the parish, singing her daily hymn of praise. I cannot say, after all these years, whether her influence on the majority of our inhabitants was entirely good. I suspect she used to irritate a good many of the younger folk. But even those who distrusted her judgment most had a kindness for her at heart. Those who were in trouble, at any rate, were always glad to see her stout figure, invariably dressed in black, bustling down the village street.

It is easy to guess that for the next few weeks after the flood Miss Mooney enjoyed herself thoroughly after her fashion. For Ashe had been 'in the papers,' and she was one of the chief authorities on the various disputed points of the story. There was an unwonted influx of callers for a long time afterwards. Ladies from the surrounding parishes who had not been near us for years began to look in for afternoon tea: sometimes, as a great treat, they were allowed to mount the stairs and take a hasty peep at me as I lay, pallid and incurious, with nothing to look at but the pattern of those curtains and of the more distant wall-paper. I must have been very ill then: I cannot recollect taking the least interest in anything.

Later on, when the summer had come fully in, I was taken out into the garden and made to lie in the sunlight on a sort of basket couch that Bagley, or one of his assistants, had discovered in the loft. It had

probably never been used since my mother's last illness. As in a dream, I must have overheard Miss Mooney arguing with my father whether lying on a couch of such sinister tradition might not be bad for me. (I had no feeling one way or the other : they might have brought out the parish bier for me to lie on for all I cared just then.) But by degrees a sort of lazy pleasure began to creep back into my life. I had nothing to do but lie and bask and listen drowsily, watching the big black beads on Miss Mooney's hat oscillating on their stems above her grey hairs as she told the story over again to some stray visitor, nodding her head now and then in emphasis.

It was terribly sad : she could hardly bear to speak of it even yet. To think of poor Andrew Waring, who had only come to the ancestral forge six (or was it seven ?) years ago, being cut off like that ! The most loyal soul in the world, and so useful in the parish. My dear, we had positively come to depend upon him for everything. Any little bit of work that wanted doing—anything extra, so to speak—Andrew was always ready. Quite offended if we didn't ask him to do it for love. Yes, but for him Rudolf would have undoubtedly been carried away and drowned.

Her voice would sink at this point until it was all but inaudible, as she leant forward with raised finger, voluble and impressive. (I was supposed, of course, not to know how close a shave I had experienced.)

'Providential' was her favourite word in dealing with the story of the accident. If Waring had not chanced (as we lightly say) to be bringing his brother home that afternoon on a visit, from Ockington station, instead of Scunthorpe as was more usual, no one would have witnessed the catastrophe at all. Both the boys would just have been drowned, and probably not a soul would have known anything of it for days afterwards. Even if Waring had been alone he could

hardly have done anything. The current, you know, was Terrific. Providentially, however, Joseph (that was the brother, my dear) kept his head. Leaning over the parapet, he was just able to catch hold of Rudolf's hands as Andrew held him up. He had managed to get his foot on something solid, Andrew had, the root of a tree or something, but he could only support himself just for that one moment. When Joseph looked down again for him he was nowhere to be seen. Carried right under the bridge.

'And, do you know,' old Miss Mooney would finish, dropping her voice again to the due reverential pitch, 'he must have got caught up there by the branches of that tree that got carried down from the end of the Long Meadow. You remember that willow that used to hang right over the stream, at the corner. They couldn't get it clear of the arch for days. And, when they did, my dear, there was poor Waring!' She sank her voice to a whisper to add darkly, 'Three whole days!'

'And what happened to the other boy? His own son, was it not?'

But Miss Mooney would never, for some inscrutable reason, make much of Jonny's experiences, which I have no doubt were worse than my own, though the results did not last so long. She would give her massive shoulders a slight shrug as she explained that Jonathan, of course, was a different type. Had a rather narrow escape, of course, but was soon all right again, everything considered. Of course, he was an orphan now. His poor mother, you know, died, within a week of hearing the news. Shock. Weak heart!

'How very sad!' the visitor would remark, not unnaturally. 'What do you suppose will become of the boy?'

Miss Mooney made a gesture with her hands as of

one who had done what she could. 'Practically, my dear, the Canon has adopted the boy. Or will, as soon as he comes back. Just at present, it was thought advisable he should not come here quite so regularly. The Canon suggested he might do a short spell of practical training—Coventry, I believe.'

And after that came, with the deadly certainty of a well-trained pair of conversationalists, a discussion on the manufacture of bicycles (which was just then becoming a matter of some local importance), and whether it would damage the watch-making and the lace, former staples of the town. And, last of all, generally just before the visitor went, there was sure to come some expression of surprise at the way Elsie was growing up.

And she was. It was true. Elsie had been growing up as it were secretly all that time, and we had hardly noticed it. But that summer (her birthday was in June) she became seventeen years of age, very nearly a year older than Jon, and not quite two years older than myself.

II

She had brown eyes, had Elsie, with a sort of pensive regard in them that made some wish to examine them more closely. Very demure she could look, upon occasion, when she let her eyelids droop and the long lashes showed up dark against the rather pale face. And then, if you chanced to say anything that struck her as funny (and she had quite a quick sense of humour), she would look up suddenly with an altogether different expression, her eyes alight, so to speak, the whole countenance animated. You had to bring something with you, of course, to produce that effect.

'I should not say she was exactly pretty,' said Miss Mooney, racking her brain for the right word to

express her favourite's curious charm. Casting about for some explanation of the impression she produced (this was in later years, perhaps), she could only admit that Elsie was not one of your regular and faultless beauties. Her features were never exactly good, though they had a certain delicacy. Her colouring was decidedly quiet. Brown hair, with no particular lustre, a forehead that would have been quite impossible if she had drawn her hair back instead of (very wisely) allowing it to come down as low as possible, anything but a straight nose, and a mouth that smiled prettily but had in repose a rather discontented droop at the corners—to enumerate these points in detail is to court a slight raising of the eyebrows. No! certainly few pretensions to good looks, in the ordinary sense of the phrase. Yet, somehow, rather fascinating if you took the trouble to watch her.

It was the perpetual change. Never the same for two consecutive minutes. A mobile face, full of possibilities. And of course she had youth, which makes up for much, and the head was small (in fact she was decidedly *petite* in every way) and well set on a graceful neck. Miss Mooney would go into silent raptures watching her. It was easy to see she thought her the most wonderful product of an altogether wonderful world.

Elsie was a born mimic. Even when she and I used to share the schoolroom together she practised that art with success. She got the local dialect so accurately that, hearing her, you could have sworn it was old Mrs. Hatch, who lived in the little cottage down by the railway line, or Mrs. Bagley, wife of the parish clerk. I think she was best of all with Miss Spiller, the schoolmistress, whose artificial and rather mincing speech was altogether a different affair. She seemed to get the precise intonation of any specimen without the slightest trouble. From no one else,

certainly, would Miss Mooney have borne a reproduction of the Canon giving out a notice in church. Even at Elsie she shook her finger reprovingly, choking down her laughter.

‘My dear, my dear! You really mustn’t! The dear Canon!’

There must have been a good deal of the actress about my sister. I noticed it for the first time when we had a village concert in the school—I think it was the Christmas before these events. As soon as Elsie stood up before the audience she seemed to be a different creature, transported into a different world. I don’t believe she was ever nervous on these occasions, whereas it made me miserable for days beforehand if I knew that I should have to stand up and recite a poem. She frankly loved it. And so did the audience. She just played upon their simple emotions as she pleased: when she sang to them their eyes followed her every movement; you could see their mouths relaxing into a slow grin of pleasure.

She discovered there the meaning of Power.

Curious affairs they were, those village concerts at Ashe. Mind you, they had rather a reputation in the neighbourhood: they were not just the ordinary clerical penny reading (as they used to call them in the distant past) got up by the local clergyman to keep his male parishioners out of the public-house. We did not want that sort of thing at Ashe. No! we set ourselves out from the first to give a real entertainment, and we used to ransack the country round to discover new talent. That particular Christmas we had the Sterndales over from Bingley to help, and Joan Sterndale was a student of the Royal College of Music! In effect, a professional. But Elsie easily distanced her in the matter of applause.

‘I don’t think her voice is quite as good as Joan’s,’ Miss Mooney admitted. ‘But the Personality——’

She broke off there. It was not necessary to say more. And it was true that Elsie never had much of a voice. A thin light soprano, whereas Joan Sterndale had a really fine contralto, and had been well trained, even then. Afterwards, I believe, she got quite a decent price for concert work. But she never looked her best on a platform, and Elsie did. That made all the difference.

I expect that evening altered my sister's scale of values a good deal. Up to that time she had always been rather accustomed to patronage. She had not quite realised her immense superiority. Actually she was two years older (or nearly) than I was. Some girls are married and mistresses of a household at seventeen, considered capable of holding their own in any society on equal terms. But what can be expected from a boy of fifteen? We, Jonny and I, were just callow, immature fledglings. It would take another four or five years before either of us could even begin to be interesting. We had not even been to school—which made us less developed than other boys of our age.

Also, she had caught Bob Sterndale looking at her while she was singing. Now Bob was, practically, a Young Man. That is to say, he had just left Oxford and gone into the Stock Exchange, which was a place where people were said to make money with extraordinary rapidity. He dressed rather well, that boy, and had an indefinable air about him as though he might be some one of importance. Also he was rather good on the piano, with accompaniments, and sang a comic song towards the end of the concert, which had fairly brought down the house. Comic songs generally 'went' at Ashe, it was true, but still——

After supper that evening—our helpers always came back to the rectory when the show was over, and had

something before driving home—she asked me what I thought of young Mr. Sterndale.

She had taken her candle, and was just going up to bed. That moment—I can see her now, and her attitude as she leaned over the rail at the top of the stairs—was the first in which I realised that she was no longer an unimportant member of the household.

‘I don’t know,’ I said; and added bluntly, ‘He never took his eyes off you all through supper.’

I take it that was what she wanted to hear me say. But of course she was not going to admit it.

‘Silly,’ she said. ‘I meant his song, of course.’

‘It seemed to go down all right. Most of them wanted another. All but Jonny. He said if we had any more of that he’d be sick.’

She made a sudden grimace, and then looked pensive.

‘Did he? I wonder why,’ she said.

Now it had not occurred to me before she said that, but suddenly I saw, as in a flash of light, why Jonny had looked so dour during that so-called comic song of young Sterndale’s. Naturally, though, I kept it strictly to myself. In fact, I scarcely allowed the thought room in my mind. But it was from that moment—that curious little grimace of Elsie’s, and the way she said those few words afterwards—that I date my enlightenment.

And now Jonny was coming to be one of the family—to live with us as a sort of adopted son. It is difficult for me to say exactly what I felt when I first heard the news. I had not seen him for so long, and so much had happened since we used to go about together, that I felt I had grown into an altogether different being. And perhaps he had done the same. Would it ever be quite the same again between us? And I could not help wondering how he would look on me when we met again. Had I not been the cause—the

innocent cause if you like, but still the cause—of the death of both his parents? In my weaker moments the mere thought of seeing him again used to make my heart palpitate.

It was one afternoon in August, when I was supposed to be practically well again—as well as they then thought I was ever likely to be—and Miss Mooney was sitting at some needlework or other by me out on the lawn. Elsie, I believe, had gone over to the Sterndales to play tennis.

‘There’s the dear Canon coming out,’ said Miss Mooney suddenly. ‘Now what can he want, I wonder? He hardly ever leaves his study so soon after lunch as this.’

I looked up and, sure enough, there he was, just stepping out of the big study window on to the terrace. The windows at the rectory all came right down to the floor on the garden side, so that you could step in and out of drawing-room, dining-room, and study without any trouble.

Miss Mooney sighed.

‘His hair is really wonderful,’ she murmured to herself.

And she was quite right. My father had a remarkable head, the sort of head that attracts attention at once in a crowd. I have a picture of him, or rather a crayon drawing by Richmond, hanging in my rooms now that brings him back to me very clearly. You would say it was an artist’s face—a musician, perhaps, or a painter—and the look was accentuated by the fact that he wore his hair rather long. It had retreated from the brow, but stood out nobly from the two sides. And it was perfectly white, and as fine as silk. It gave the impression sometimes of a halo surrounding the head.

He came out towards us slowly in the bright sunshine.

‘Well, Miss Mooney, and how is the invalid?’

‘Poor boy! I think he’s getting on fairly, Canon. But we must be careful with him for a little while longer, I think.’

If Miss Mooney had had her way, no member of the family would ever have completely recovered from a serious illness. She liked to keep them in a state of interesting convalescence.

‘I’m perfectly all right,’ I put in, seizing my opportunity. ‘Only dead tired of doing nothing. I want to get to work again.’

‘Just a few days more,’ Miss Mooney protested. ‘I really think, Canon, he might begin again in a week or so.’

My father came up close and looked me over with his quizzical eyes. He put his hand on my forehead.

‘H’m! I don’t detect any fever. Miss Mooney, I want you to make arrangements, if you will be so kind. Joseph Waring has taken on the forge. I don’t think it would be quite fair to him to let Jonathan stay there any longer. In fact, I have settled for him to come up here next Monday.’

Miss Mooney’s face paled perceptibly, and a frightened look crept into her pale blue eyes. It always did when she was faced with the prospect of change.

‘Is he—is he to live here, Canon?’

‘If you have no serious objection,’ said my father gravely, his eyes showing a twinkle of amusement, ‘he is going to become one of the family.’

Miss Mooney was decidedly more fluttered than usual.

‘You mean—in every way?’ she hazarded.

‘Certainly I do. In every way? What are we to understand by that? Come, come, Miss Mooney, you don’t believe in doing things by halves, do you? You don’t dislike the lad, I hope, eh?’

He rallied her in his half-humorous, half-testy fashion, while she nervously protested that she had

meant nothing at all. No ! she didn't dislike Jonathan in the least : she was only wondering— After some hesitation she relapsed upon the question of expense. ' Do you really think you ought to, Canon ? Of course it is just like you. But, with so many expenses coming on. Elsie growing up, and one thing and another. So many calls on you.'

I think I felt, even then, that her mind was on Elsie all the time, and not solely on the question of expense. But the Canon cut her short.

' Tut, tut, Miss Mooney, I must manage my finances for myself. But you 'll get a room ready for the boy by Monday. And you 'll be ready to start work again by that time, I expect.' He let his hand rest a moment on my head.

As for me, I assented readily enough. But it was clear that my companion was gravely disturbed. She said not a word after he had gone for at least five minutes, pursing her lips together over her work.

Then at last she spoke aloud. Unconsciously, I suppose.

' Dear, dear ! I do hope it will be all right,' she said.

III

It was a curious meeting, when Jon and I saw each other that Monday morning for the first time since the accident. We were both decidedly shy. I had expected to feel some embarrassment myself, but somehow I had never thought he would show any signs of it. Perhaps I infected him. And then he looked so different from what he had been, so much taller, and altogether more developed. He seemed to me quite the young man : to myself I seemed altogether an inferior animal.

We walked out into the garden together, and for some time neither of us seemed able to say anything.

Curious, to reflect that the last time we had been together we had been on the very borderland of Life and Death. But for Jonny I probably should not have been there at all that sunny autumn morning. For it was he who kept me from being swept under the bridge until the others came up. And, supposing he had not followed me into the boat, where should I have been, and what should I have become? I looked up at him as we walked down over the lawn and wondered whether he had thought of the same subject, and what conclusion he had come to. I wanted to find out tremendously, but what can you say on topics like that? We walked on, and every step we took it became harder to say anything of serious import at all.

I stopped, to examine the turf.

'The pitch will be a bit bumpy this year,' I said at last. 'No one has done anything to it yet.'

And they hadn't. But then at Ashe we did not often begin cricket seriously till after the hay was in. And this year, of course, there had been no one to take charge.

Jonny tested the turf with his foot soberly before replying.

'It wants watering and rolling. I'd better get some of them up in the evenings to help. Suppose the Canon 'll want us to play a match or two.' He measured me with his blue eyes. 'Are you fit enough to take charge o' the team?'

'Me? Nonsense! I'm fit enough, but I'm not good enough. You 'll be in command, of course.'

He shook his head. '"Twouldn't do. Father was right enough. He'd been a county cricketer, but they wouldn't pay attention to me. It'd make them jealous, too. I haven't got the position.'

Just now and then, in those days, Jonny gave a hint of the Midland accent in his speech.

'I couldn't do it,' I protested. 'Besides, you belong to the rectory now as much as I do.'

'Then it'll have to be John Arnold,' he said. And he wouldn't budge from that position, no matter what I said. John Arnold it was, for a time—until other developments took place.

And by degrees we got to talking naturally enough. He told me what he had been doing over at the bicycle works in Coventry. There was no mistaking the enthusiasm in his voice and manner when he got on to this subject. He was always keen on anything to do with practical engineering.

'That's the sort of job I like—that,' he said with relish. 'They let me bring one of 'em back with me. The Canon said you should have another—as soon as I'd shown you how to manage them.'

'It's all very well,' I protested, 'but I hope you're not going into the bicycle-making business before we go up to Cambridge. Just remember you've got to come up to St. Michael's with me first.'

But we had got over our first shyness all right by now. Together we went down to the shed, to have a look at the new marvel. The shed in question was a sort of lean-to built up against the old coach-house, opposite the loft where we had built the famous canoe. And there he showed me a bright and shining specimen of the bicycle of those days, a 54-inch roadster, as they used to call them, with plated hubs and handle-bar, and a neatly painted, beautifully curved back-bone in black picked out with a bright yellow line. I thought it a marvel of grace as I saw it standing there, almost fresh from the makers. And so it was. They were fine machines, outmoded as they are now, those old solid-tyred high bicycles of the 'eighties.

'By Jove!' I said at once with enthusiasm, 'I must have one of these.' Jon took it out, and rode up and

down the drive and round by the churchyard into the back gate again. How easy it looked! And how glorious to be able to travel miles along the roads, wherever one wished, at some ten miles an hour or more, instead of limping painfully on foot! I had always wanted some means of swifter locomotion. We had never even had a horse that I could ride. When we wanted one we had to hire in the village, and Bagley, putting on his old livery coat with the brass buttons, would solemnly drive us to the station or wherever we wanted to go. Of course I had seen a high bicycle before, but never examined one at all closely. Jonny and I went over this one pretty thoroughly, while he spoke at length and learnedly about the new ball bearings which were just superseding the old rollers. He took most of the machine to pieces for my benefit—he thoroughly enjoyed doing this kind of thing—and put it together again with all the skill of an expert workman.

‘They ’ll let the Canon have another like this for a ten-pound note,’ said Jonny. ‘You ’ll want it a couple of inches lower, I expect.’ He hoisted me up, and we went slowly up and down the drive together. I could only just reach the pedal at its lowest with the tip of my toe, and it was a strenuous business for Jonny, but he managed it wonderfully. Upon us, so engaged, came Miss Mooney and Elsie on their way back from the village, coming back for luncheon, I suppose, after some parochial business or other. Probably taking the money for the clothing club.

Elsie, for some reason or other, was in one of her exceptionally bright moods that morning. She had her moods. Sometimes she would be almost haughty and stand-offish, but every now and then she would be so gay and charming that you could easily understand why she was so popular among the parishioners. I could distinctly feel Jonny’s hand trembling as he

clutched the saddle behind me. They came down the drive, Elsie humming a tune under her breath.

'That's how it went, Mooney,' she was saying. (She always used to call the poor old lady by that name when they were alone.) 'How I wish I were on the stage! I believe I could make my fortune in a year or less.' She made a little pirouette on the gravel, pulling herself together with an exaggerated demureness as we came in sight.

'Why, it's our Jonny come back again,' she exclaimed. 'How are you, Jonny? You know you are to be another little brother now, so you must condescend to notice us occasionally.' She swept him a curtsy. 'It will be delightful to have you,' she went on in a totally different voice.

What an actress she was! You should have seen her holding out her daintily gloved hand for Jonny to take. The way she smiled upon him then would have captured any one. As for me, I had to scramble down off the bicycle as best I could, for Jonny had let go of it in his confusion. It came clattering down on one side.

'What fun!' said Elsie, clapping her hands. 'One of these days you shall teach me, Jonny. We will send Mooney off somewhere to buy groceries in Leicester. I'm sure I could learn to ride in two lessons.'

Jonny's face flushed as he took her hand. Then he suddenly went quite white. I saw what had happened almost before he did. There was a great black mark on Elsie's glove. Miss Mooney saw it as well.

'My dear child, what on earth have you been doing to your nice new gloves?' she cried, so that we could not well avoid seeing what had happened.

And the fact was, Jonny's hands were in the most appalling mess, and he had never noticed it. Oiling

the machine, and especially taking it to pieces and re-assembling the parts, were untidy jobs in those days, and I suppose his few months at the Coventry works had made him a little careless about such matters. I had never seen him at a loss before, but now he had nothing to say : he just stood there like a small school-boy discovered in some crime and called up for punishment.

Of course Elsie knew well enough what had happened. But I will say for her that on this occasion she did the right thing. You could never catch Elsie at a loss.

‘Oh dear,’ she said, frowning a little, ‘it must have been the churchyard gate. I quite forgot they had been painting it.’

I could almost see the struggle going on in Jon’s face. But he was not going to shelter himself behind any churchyard gate.

‘I’m afraid I’ve been messing about with this here machine,’ he said. And he exhibited his hands before them both to make sure there should be no mistake.

Miss Mooney made a sort of clicking noise, intended to indicate concern and surprise at his condition. But Elsie only laughed, looking at him quite kindly. Though generally, I am bound to say, she was wont to regard the slightest accident to her clothes as a very serious matter indeed. And I suppose it was, considering the small amount she had to spend on such things then.

‘Come along, Mooney,’ she said gaily. ‘It’s all right. A little spirits of wine will take it out. Good-bye for the present!’ She waved her hand at us in farewell as she went on up the drive.

It did not need anything more from Jonny to tell me how things were then. I could tell it from a hundred signs—even from his rare relapse into the speech of the country. Unless he had been deeply stirred he would never have permitted himself to say

‘this here machine.’ Indeed, I am not sure that he did not slur the aspirate. And I could tell, too, by the way his eyes followed her as she left, and by the silence that descended on us as we resumed our lesson. He was, no doubt, thinking too hard to speak. And I had nothing to say.

Even at that time I felt dimly that there was likely to be trouble in the future between those two. He so obviously worshipped the ground she trod on, and in my own mind I was so certain that she could not really care for him in the same way. I mean to say, I knew Elsie well enough to be aware that she was not the sort to fall victim to a *grande passion*. As I read her then, she was just experimenting—trying her wings, so to speak—practising for future flights of coquetry. And as Jonny went on trying to help me keep my balance up and down the drive, I was filled with compassion for him. Assuredly he was going to have a difficult time in the future.

Chapter IV

Introducing Mr. Percy Cudden

I

ASHE was not a bad living, as such things go in that part of the country. Or rather as they went in days when six or seven hundred a year was considered affluence, and a thousand as wealth almost beyond the dreams of parsonic avarice. But that old rectory of ours was certainly too large for the income unless the incumbent had private means. It was an ancient and rambling house, considerably altered by the last occupant, who had added to the original building the imposing white stucco front that so impressed the casual traveller coming from Duncote or Misterton. And the garden wanted a lot of attention. And then there was a whole row of nondescript buildings at the

back : coach-houses and harness-room and stables and a pig-sty or two, and lofts where the mixed scent of hay and apples hung throughout the year ; and then a gate with a tremendous bar across it that defended the rectory from intrusion by unauthorised travellers on the high road running between our outbuildings and the churchyard. At least, it should have defended us. But every tramp in the county knew the Canon. Sometimes we discovered curious signs on the outside of that gate, or on the wall close at hand. To the initiate their significance must have been complimentary to the house, for I noticed that the number of our visitors always showed a marked increase after one of these hieroglyphics appeared.

Miss Mooney, who was as soft-hearted as the Canon himself, reproached him sometimes for the liberality with which he handed out half-crowns to these wandering gentry. She would not have any one starve if she could help it, but Money !

‘ You never know what they will do with money,’ she lamented, mindful of the three public-houses that, somehow or other, managed to support themselves down the village street on the Willoughby road.

‘ Ah, Miss Mooney,’ said my father, ‘ these things are hidden from us, perhaps mercifully. Did the boy tell you how we found two of your biggest sandwiches in the ditch just by the railway bridge yesterday ? ’

I was, of course, the boy. And it was our old spaniel, Floss, who discovered, much to her own satisfaction, the better part of those two huge sandwiches that Miss Mooney had cut with her own hand that morning for an especially ragged tramp.

She raised hands and eyes to heaven in protest. My recollection of Miss Mooney is one of almost perpetual protest, laughing or smiling. She liked it : she posed purposely as a butt for the Canon’s little shafts of ridicule, I believe, because she thought it was so good

for him to have a foolish old woman at hand to distract his attention from too serious matters. I have even heard her say as much in so many words. And it was true enough that my father enjoyed a little gentle chaff on occasion.

‘Money is money, Canon, after all,’ she said. ‘And the food might have been the saving of him—if he had been really starving, as he said.’

‘As it was, Floss ate it,’ said my father. ‘And Floss is far too fat already. However—I am far from wishing to restrain your generosity, Miss Mooney.’

‘I know, Canon. How could you stop me, when you are so much worse yourself? You will ruin yourself some day, and the children will have to come and take refuge with me.’

And she looked round at us like an old hen that asks for nothing better than to be gathering her chickens together under her wings. Indeed, I believe Miss Mooney would have welcomed some disastrous cataclysm, some eclipse of the fortunes of the house of Strange, in the hope that so she might best manifest her real affection for us all. And, of course, for Elsie especially. Quite naturally, Elsie was her favourite, then and always.

She was a little bit fond of looking forward to a thoroughly dismal future, was Miss Mooney, and of speaking quite openly to us about it, perhaps hoping thereby to prepare and harden us for rough adventures in days of poverty to come. The dear Canon, she repeated regularly, gave away everything he had. As he used to be a good living, perhaps, twenty or thirty years ago, but now, with all this agricultural depression! She had heard rumours even about old Nicholas Harrison, who farmed the greater part of the glebe. Nicholas, of course, would do anything humanly possible for the Canon, but it was a case now of starving the land or reducing the rent.

‘Fancy, when it comes to Nicholas Harrison saying that!’ she exclaimed. ‘Old Nicholas! Rector’s churchwarden, who has farmed the glebe for the last twenty-five years, and whose fathers had it before him. Fancy, if he had to give it up!’

Imagination reeled before the horrid prospect.

And when Jonny Waring came to take up his permanent abode with us she could not help pointing out to me now and then that it would make a difference. The Canon was so generous at heart that he never thought of these things: they positively never occurred to him. Of course she recognised that we owed something to the Warings, as a family, but there were limits!

Cambridge! The very idea of that ancient university would send a shudder through Miss Mooney’s ample person. It became a grim, devouring monster, eating up her Elsie’s portion. She began to economise in her household expenses, very much against the grain, until the Canon himself raised a protest against the quality of the tea. I admit she did not keep that up long. Miss Mooney was perhaps the worst economist I have ever seen at the head of a household.

‘I am so afraid, Canon,’ she almost wailed. ‘I’m so afraid you won’t have enough to—to live on comfortably. And with Elsie, too, just at that age. So important. Of course, if they could both get good scholarships——’

‘Bless the woman!’ said my father, a trifle impatiently. He was not often impatient, but Miss Mooney was sometimes difficult to bear. ‘Of course they’ll get scholarships. And even if they don’t get very good ones, I mean them to have equal chances with their contemporaries. Cambridge it must be, for both of them, even if we have to eat cold mutton and rice pudding, Miss Mooney.’

‘Oh, Canon! And rice pudding is the one thing you can never stand.’

‘Then it is clear that we must bestir ourselves. Let us call in the New World to redress the balance of the old! In other words, Miss Mooney—I had better break it to you at once—I have been asked to take two more pupils.’

And again the hands and eyes went up to heaven. It was flying in the face of Providence (whatever that might be) for a man with all he had to do to undertake new charges of that kind. So wearing! It was not as though he were still a young man. Miss Mooney almost wept. Hers was a sensitive and sentimental soul.

II

And that same summer, just after Easter, came the first of the two strangers. It must be admitted that he did something to make Ashe rectory more lively than it had been before his advent. He was the son of a manufacturer in Fleckney—a stocking-maker—and he had remarkably red hair, plenty of money, and Ideas. Sometimes I see the name of the firm now, advertising their seamless double heels or some ingenious device of the kind in the public press, and immediately the face and figure of young Percy Cudden rise up before me. He might have been looking after the Publicity Department of the firm now. If ever a man was cut out by Nature for that line of business it was Percy.

There seemed to be nothing he couldn’t do, or at all events attempt. He was musical, and full of courage: the second Sunday after his arrival he volunteered to play the organ in church, because Miss Spiller, who had now taken on this duty, was laid up with a touch of influenza. And except for being a little free with his Amens (the Canon had rather a trick of dropping his voice half-way through a prayer, misleading to those who were not well acquainted

with the book), he did it very creditably indeed. The family did not know much about music, it is true. Even Miss Mooney, who had taught Elsie to sing and play, could hardly be called an expert. I remember her expressing her pleasure at the concluding voluntary as we came out of church.

‘What was that delightful thing you played, Mr. Cudden? I know it so well, but I seem to have forgotten the name.’

We were all walking back together, Elsie and Miss Mooney, and then Percy Cudden, Jonny, and myself. Percy was the sort of fellow who always found himself next the ladies—if there were any about.

He laughed, and I noticed how pleasant his freckled face became.

‘Miss Strange knows the name, I’ll bet,’ he said, and his eyes twinkled.

‘It sounded to me like that polka you were playing last night,’ said Elsie. ‘Only you managed to turn it into a sort of march.’

‘Right! Play it without the jerks and about half the pace, and it does fine on the organ. D’you think the Canon will object, Miss Mooney?’

‘Father doesn’t know one tune from another,’ Elsie put in, laughing.

‘My dear,’ protested Miss Mooney mildly, ‘when I used to play the organ myself, the Canon invariably selected the hymns. He was very fond of some tunes, I remember.’

‘He might possibly have known two,’ Elsie admitted. ‘“The Church’s One Foundation,” I expect, and “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” But I don’t suppose he could tell you which was which if you asked him now.’

She was very merry that morning as we walked back from church. Elsie was generally at her best when there was a new male creature at hand. I know brothers are apt to be a little slow at perceiving their

sisters' charms, and I am uneasily conscious of allowing traces of cynicism to appear here and there, but I quite cheerfully admit that when she chose to let herself go, Elsie could turn the head of most male creatures within sight, or hearing. The red-headed Percy, I could see, was already smouldering; he would burst into flame in the course of a few weeks. And I could see, too, that Jonny did not altogether like it. Not that he said anything about his private feelings: he was never the sort of fellow to give himself away, and since the accident he had been more reserved than ever. He was proud, too. I don't know what dreams he may not have cherished in his heart, but he was not going to let them appear on the surface—until he had made a position for himself. But I caught a glimpse of his expression now and then when Elsie smiled up at young Cudden, and I knew what he felt. Percy Cudden was exactly the sort of young man who inspires an honest envy in the breast of his contemporaries. There seemed to be nothing he could not do.

III

He could draw, it appeared, as well as play the organ. Draw and design and paint in water-colours. And the fellow had such a stimulating way with him that in a few weeks he had taken charge, as you might say, of the whole artistic education of the house. Everybody began to try drawing, and dabbling in paint. I know I filled whole sketch-books about that time. Elsie displayed quite a talent for it. Even Miss Mooney dug out some prehistoric box of paints, and was seen to sit out in the garden, trying her hand at a picture of the front of the house.

And then the volatile Percy began to decorate the house. Certainly it was a long time since Ashe rectory had been properly overhauled and set in order. The

big drawing-room had never been altered since Elsie could remember: it had always been a curiously bare, cold-looking room, distempered in pale blue. The ingenious Percy set to work on these walls, at first in an almost surreptitious fashion. The first general intimation of his new activity came one morning when Miss Mooney (who had temporarily mislaid her spectacles) spent some time attempting to brush a big spider from the wall, only to find at last that it was merely a lifelike representation of the insect from the hand of the new pupil. And really, as she said afterwards, it was so admirably done that she could not resist bringing the Canon in from his study to have a look at it before luncheon.

We all trooped in with him.

‘My dear Canon,’ said Miss Mooney, pointing at the wall, ‘look at it! Did you ever see anything quite so real? I assure you I brushed and brushed away, and could not make out what was the matter, for the life of me. He is really a perfect Genius, that boy.’

Percy himself was not there: probably he was upstairs washing: he was generally late for meals.

My father put up his glasses carefully and surveyed the work. He was not a critic of painting, any more than of music, but he was quite prepared to admit that it was clever. Only, where was this sort of thing going to stop?

‘H’m, I don’t know,’ he mused. ‘What do you think, Miss Mooney? Ought we to encourage these—er—insects crawling up our walls?’

But Miss Mooney was filled with enthusiasm. That was one of the remarkable things about Percy Cudden. He aroused enthusiasms in the most improbable persons, for the most unlikely causes. He would have made the most admirable director of a shady mining company.

‘Oh, but look!’ she cried eagerly. ‘There are other things as well. There’s a bough of a tree up in that corner, with the dearest little chaffinch sitting on it. And do look at those butterflies! I call it really most remarkable, Canon, for a boy of that age. When you consider he’s had practically no training, either.’

And Elsie became quite excited about it.

‘Oh, father dear, what fun it will be!’ she exclaimed. ‘You won’t mind, will you? The room really was—rather a disgrace. Now we can all get to work on it, and make it the show of the county.’

Elsie had her own ideas about decoration, which were not altogether mine nor, perhaps, altogether Percy Cudden’s. But she had her way, and helped him for the whole of the next wet afternoon (Miss Mooney being, of course, discreetly in the background) to enrich the walls with a dado of yellow flags and iris, with plenty of water and sky, and one big heron standing upright in the corner with a fish in its beak. Percy supplied the comic relief. His birds and fishes, insects and amphibians, were remarkable. He could never keep quite serious for any length of time.

All of us liked Percy. Jonny himself could not help being fond of the fellow, though it must have been rather galling to find him possessed of so many unusual talents. True, Percy was never much of a cricketer, but it took us some little time before we discovered how poor he was. He could act the part so well that all but the very elect might have been deceived. Cudden going in to bat might have been the pride of Surrey, by the look of him. He had assimilated all the little tricks and mannerisms of the great. They impressed us so much at first that we made him captain Ashe that summer, and he did not manage so badly either. Jonny had come on a lot as a bowler. He had acquired somehow or other an occasional

break-back which proved most devastating against our ordinary opponents. By his own account, it came of holding the ball in a peculiar way so that his fingers, which were long and very powerful, could 'work across' the seam. He was always trying to explain it to me, but I could never quite grasp the secret. It worked most times, as he said, but some days it was less strong than others.

'It ought to come every time, regularly,' he complained. Jonny liked to have the world all logical.

'Nonsense!' I said. 'You don't want it every time. Keep them guessing. If you make one go with the arm now and then, so much the better. Particularly if you don't quite know yourself when it's going to happen.'

And I still think I was right. It is the unexpected that pays, in cricket as in other things. But Jonny couldn't always see it in those days.

IV

I suppose it was the mathematical bent in him that made him want everything to work out like a problem on the blackboard. It was the same with religion. He wanted some adequate formula by which he could guide his life, and it did not seem to him that he could find one. That summer and autumn I seem to remember by the long talks we used to have on these matters, generally in one of our rooms after the others had gone to bed. Percy would join in with great readiness: he was ready to join in anything that was going; and he could find you arguments on either side at demand. A wonderful fellow. But he argued for glory, and Jonny was seriously trying to find a road. He wanted to live right. He had a great sense of making the best out of himself. We were sent into the world with certain talents, and it was

our job to see that they were not wasted. But it seemed to him, so far as he could see, that in certain cases they must be wasted, no matter how bravely you tried to develop them. It was the matter of Sudden Death that troubled him most just then.

‘It seems such waste,’ he would say. Perhaps there had been a fatal accident in the papers, or there had been a battle in Egypt or Afghanistan, or something of that kind. A casualty list of any sort always brought up the subject. Those young fellows must have been sent into the world for some purpose, and here they were, knocked out almost before they had started.

Dear old Percy Cudden loved talking on this topic. (Indeed he was ready enough to hold forth on any subject that came along, but especially on one that gave Scope.)

‘Why!’ he put in gaily, ‘what sort of life do you want, my dear fellow? Must have a bit of a gamble, or where’s the fun of it all? Some of us get the luck and the others don’t. Perhaps they get it made up to them in the next world.’

‘That’s just what I want to know. I want some definite information about this next world, and I never get it.’

‘How can you expect to get it?’

‘Well, one would expect to get something out of the Church and its ministers. I mean to say, one would expect them to have formulated some sort of scheme of what we may hope to find when we get there. But they never give it you—or if they do it’s a most unsatisfactory sort of picture. To put it quite frankly, have either of you ever heard any description of the next world that made you anxious to get there?’

Jonny was very serious in these discussions. He clearly wanted to know: he was anxious to get at the truth. Percy, in his more irresponsible fashion, liked

to project his imagination into the future. As for me, I had always a tendency to act as moderator in these discussions. I did not contribute much of any value, but I kept things going with a word here and there.

Percy admitted that he was not quite sure which he disliked most, the Heaven or Hell of the orthodox. But then no one believed in these any longer. The personal devil had gone some time ago : the personal God would soon follow.

I put in a remark here to the effect that Heaven was a condition rather than a place. I was rather proud of it at the time, having discovered it a few days before in some book of that epoch.

‘All the same,’ said Jonny, ‘we have got to put something in the place of Heaven and Hell, God and the Devil. We may not believe in them any longer as they used to be painted, but I take it they stood for something.’

Percy was of opinion that civilisation in its youth preferred concrete figures to abstract ideas. Early races invariably impersonated good and evil, the creative principle and the destructive. Hence all this jungle of imaginary detail that had sprung up round the trellis-work of religion. It wanted clearing before we could see where we were. Was there a future state at all? Did we just perish when the body died, and only exist again in some other form? Or was there a Soul, something indestructible, that survived physical death and carried on its own personality into another stage of existence?

‘And if so, what does it do when it gets there?’ I interjected. ‘That is the really important point.’

‘The other comes first. If there is no soul, we need not worry about what it does. *Cadit quaestio.*’ Thus Percy, who was rather fond of bringing touches of the classics into his more serious conversation.

Jonny argued that if our personalities did not sur-

vive death, the universe was constructed on a wrong principle altogether. If they did not, what did it matter how we employed our time on earth? What was the good of all this elaborate apparatus with which we had been fitted, including a Conscience that persisted in annoying us when we strayed from the path of rectitude—or what we conceived to be rectitude? He could not believe that we had been dowered with intelligence, reasoning power, so many undeveloped or half-developed aspirations if they were all to be snuffed out suddenly and come to nothing.

And then we used to set to work and construct our future state of being to our own satisfaction. I suspect we got some of our ideas from my father's sermons. It was one of his favourite theories that we spent our time on this earth in building our future habitations. Only, of course, his language was so coloured by trope and metaphor that his congregation rarely had any very clear idea of his meaning. I doubt sometimes if he knew himself what he was trying to express. Once when Jonny tried to get a definite pronouncement out of him on some point we had been disputing he put the question aside as of no real importance.

'When you are as old as I am,' he said, 'you will realise that these things do not really matter. What does matter is that you should take interest enough in spiritual things to try and find things out for yourself. Nothing is of value except what you make your own by personal exertion.'

And when Jonny tackled him even more resolutely, trying to find out what his own opinions were, he merely patted him gently on the shoulder.

'Come, Jonny, I am too old to be cross-examined. Besides, what I may happen to think now might not be suitable for a young man of seventeen.' And he would sigh and smile as he paced up and down the room. 'You have to work out your own salvation.

With a great price obtained I this freedom, but I cannot pass it on to you ; and if I could it would be valueless—like most things that we obtain without fighting for them. And now, suppose we see what you have done with this algebra problem.'

v

All that summer and autumn we practised cricket assiduously when we could get a few stray minutes to spare. You must not suppose that we did nothing but argue in circles over the scheme of the universe. When we went up to Cambridge—if that eagerly anticipated day ever came to pass—we were going to make some stir in the cricketing world, if in no other. On that point we were all determined ; and in the meanwhile there were our own village matches to be considered, with the great Willoughby annual fight coming off at the end of the season. So Jonny spent a lot of time trying to import sufficient variety into his deliveries, and I helped him as well as I could. Of course he was the star. Percy and I did not honestly expect to do more than squeeze into our college team, but Jonny might do anything, with luck.

We used to go down to the pitch in the rectory field at any odd time when we could get a few minutes for practice. Usually there was half an hour or more before lunch. Between twelve and half-past the Canon would begin to get fidgety in his chair. The signs were always the same. He would suddenly get up and stretch himself, and then begin to pace up and down the room, a little impatiently. I suppose he found he could not stand the strain of teaching quite so well as he did thirty or forty years before. And then, almost like clockwork, came the looked-for words of dismissal.

‘ Well, well, suppose we get a little fresh air into the system ! ’

And forthwith he would make for the hat-room by the front door, where the hats, coats, boots, and other out-of-door implements were kept, including bats and stumps. Down he would take his oldest wide-awake from its accustomed peg, while Jonny and I would collect a ball and a pair of gloves and get down to the field, where the wickets were pitched all ready, in double-quick time, considering my infirmity. For I still had a bit of a limp, though I could get about a lot quicker than of old. That was one reason why I was training myself to keep wicket—that and also the fact that I had a sort of natural quickness for the post. Also I remembered old Waring saying once that a good wicket-keeper was always worth his place in any team—even if he never made a run. And it helped Jonny, too, or so I thought, to have some one behind the sticks to tell him what it felt like and whether he was pitching them about right.

Sometimes Percy came too, if he did not happen to be engaged in some other enterprise, and assisted by taking up his classic position at the wicket. He was always generous in his applause when the stumps went flying, or when I happened to take a sharp snick rather neatly. It was good practice taking a fast bowler on that wicket. They used to fly about a bit, and there was nothing surprising in Percy’s florid style being unable to keep them out of the wicket when they broke back a foot, or kept low, or swung in down the hill from leg (those were the really nasty ones). But he took it all with the best grace in the world. There was nothing mean about Percy.

‘ By Jove,’ he would say, when his off stump went somersaulting over the turf like a shot rabbit, ‘ that was a teaser, Lohmann. Must have come back a yard.’

Or, 'I say, Lyttelton, that wasn't too bad. Didn't think you'd get that one. Ought to have been a boundary.'

He was a real good sort, was Percy. I have seen him take one of Jonny's fastest on the thigh, and the next one on the left forearm, and never flinch. He may not have been a great bat, but he was full of pluck. And as a captain he did very well indeed for the village. Everybody liked him, and he had a way of getting things done, and underneath everything quite a respectable knowledge of the game. We had never had such a successful season as we had that year, even when old Waring had been running the team. I don't think we ever came near losing a single match. Ashe became quite a notable village.

Burnett, the old pupil and ex-Cambridge batsman, brought over his country-house team again that year, and was handsomely beaten. I admit we had all the luck of that match. They had two or three 'class' bats, but anything may happen to even the best bat in village cricket, and Jonny was in tremendous form that day. Percy put him on at the nursery end (he would persist in calling it by that name because the perambulators of half the neighbourhood used to congregate for shelter under the Spanish poplars on that side), and he came swinging down the hill from leg in a manner very trying to batsmen who were at all shy of being knocked about. I gathered two snicks at the wicket, rather luckily, and fortunately we had a useful man at slip who caught two more. Jonny got nine wickets that day, and their total score was only seventy-four. We made a hundred and twenty, Percy having told us to go in and hit for all we were worth. Careful play seldom paid on the Ashe wicket.

I remember that match the better because they brought a man called Winter with them, who had

once kept for the Gentlemen at Lord's. He gave me a tip that I never forgot, and I hasten to pass it on to young stumpers who are fresh to the business. 'Keep your fingers pointing downwards,' was his slogan. 'If you don't, sooner or later you will get a ball on the end of one of them, and that finger will never be quite the same again.' He showed me his own hands, and they hadn't a mark on them.

Yes! it was a good time we had that summer. I am not sure it does not stand out as about the best summer I remember. We were just the right age then, and there was no jarring element, and we were so thoroughly interested in everything we were doing. The world seemed so stable, too, in those days. We may have felt at the back of our minds that Ashe could not go on for ever, but we never stopped to think what it would be like when the end came. Ashe without the Canon, and Miss Mooney, and the rectory in other hands, and the rest of us scattered to the four winds—it all seemed impossible. Some day, of course, it would come to pass, but not for many years yet. We had to go up to Cambridge first, and get our degrees and settle down to our work in the world; and Elsie would have to fix upon one of these young men of hers and marry and organise private theatricals somewhere else; and then perhaps the old order would be permitted to change. But not till then.

Chapter V

Reginald

I

It was a year later that Reginald appeared, very much to our disgust. He was a decidedly good-looking boy—only unfortunately we could never bring ourselves to admit it. His features were admirable. A small

head with a delicately cut aquiline nose, arched eyebrows, black wavy hair parted accurately in the middle, good hands and feet, quite well made all round. You would have put him down as an aristocrat at sight, before knowing anything about him, especially as he had immense self-possession with his elders. He became at once a tremendous favourite with all the old ladies of the neighbourhood. Miss Mooney, of course, fell to him. I will say that he was generally seen at his best with women.

And, of course, the fact that he was a baronet's son may have helped. One of these days Reginald would be a baronet himself—assuming that he survived the present holder and that hereditary titles had not been abolished. Sir Reginald Hicks, of Bingley Hall. Not perhaps a very aristocratic name, but you cannot have everything. Nor, as a matter of fact, was it really an aristocratic family. There was something a little unsavoury about the bestowal of the title on the first holder: I think he had been one of those Crimean contractors who made fortunes out of supplying the army with boots, or cavalry fodder, or perhaps tents—not always of the highest quality. However, stories of that sort die down after a while. The present baronet, his son, appeared to spend most of his time and a good deal of his money hanging about the Mediterranean in his yacht. We heard a great deal about that yacht later on.

I suspect my father had his doubts about Reginald from the first. He had been, if not exactly expelled, let us say requested to remove himself from Eton a year before he was due to leave.

‘It may or may not have been his own fault,’ said my father. ‘But I want you three to look after the lad. My impression is, the poor fellow has never had a fair chance.’

The Canon had probably been taken in by the deli-

cately pencilled eyebrows. Also, I have no doubt the terms offered were pretty high, and just then he wanted money for the completion of our education. Cambridge, as Miss Mooney said, would probably cost a good deal—more than he could spare out of his income—and he was beginning to lay by certain sums of money which he called ‘University Expenses Fund.’ I used to come across the initials ‘U.E.F.’ afterwards when looking through his diaries (the Canon was a great keeper of diaries), and for some time I wondered what they meant, followed as they were by columns of figures.

I maintain we did our very best, at the beginning, to help the fellow along. Of course we did not pretend to like the idea of his coming. Boys are extraordinarily conservative: change of any sort is repugnant to their nature. We all three sat and talked him over that first night, while he was busy unpacking his things in the spare room, that had not been tenanted for Heaven knows how long, and had been put in order (with incredible fussing from Miss Mooney) especially for his benefit.

Percy Cudden, taking the lead as usual, threw himself back in the armchair.

‘Pretty hopeless, I should say,’ he announced. He turned to Jonny. ‘What do you think?’

Jonny considered carefully. He always liked to be strictly fair.

‘I don’t know that I care much for him, at first sight. May improve, I suppose.’

‘Not a chance of it,’ I put in bitterly. ‘Personally, I don’t mind saying I hate the very sight of the beast.’ It is a little curious that I was much the most violent about Reggie at first.

‘That’s all very well,’ said Jonny again, ‘but we said we’d do our best to help him along.’

‘So we will. Help him along out of this. Hang it

all, I wish he hadn't come. Three's company, but four's none. Not when he's one of the four.'

'He got on with Miss Mooney all right.' Thus Percy, reflectively. And he had: Mooney was his willing captive from the first. And Elsie, naturally, had been very nice to him at dinner. She could not help being pleasant to a newcomer, and a rather nice-looking newcomer, who might some day be a baronet. No! I do not really suppose that fact had anything to do with it. She would have been the same to any stranger. She had been the same to Percy Cudden himself. The fact was, her artistic instinct compelled her to try her powers of enchantment: she could no more help doing it than she could help swallowing when a morsel was already half-way down her throat. But neither of my two companions liked to see her employing upon another the same spells that she had woven for them. I did not like it myself, though I had no cause for jealousy. It seemed to me a cheapening of herself.

But there! I never pretended to understand Elsie. I have seen other women do much the same, and I have never understood why, unless it has become a sort of habit that they cannot break through. To me there is something cynical about it. They will openly, before your face, employ the same wiles on another that, perhaps only a few weeks ago, they employed on yourself. As though they wished you to observe how artificial it all was, how the smile was summoned up and the eager look of attention: how, at a given moment, the long eyelashes would droop, or the eyes themselves suddenly become alight with animation. They will use, sometimes, the actual phrases that you had thought were reserved for yourself. Once or twice that evening I had seen Jonny flush red. Even Percy Cudden looked disturbed. But both of them would have died rather than say anything about it.

To them, I suppose, it was just an accident : she did not know what she was doing. Of course it was nothing of the kind. She was simply practising. First and last, she was an actress.

II

Jonny behaved very well about young Hicks, I must say. Because, naturally, Jonny had a violent temper, which took a lot of holding in check, and from the very first it was quite clear that Hicks was going to be uncommonly difficult to live with. His manner when we kindly suggested that he should join us in anything was inconceivably aggravating. He condescended : he thought on the whole he would rather not. It seemed hardly good enough, he thought. Our final cricket match of the year, the great contest with Willoughby, was coming on, as usual, as soon as the harvest was safely in, and we rather wanted to try our new recruit. With immense difficulty we got him down to the field one evening. He had been talking pretty big that afternoon at luncheon. Had played for the second eleven, and knocked up several fifties for his house, and all that sort of thing. What was this match we were all so keen about ? Willoughby ? A rotten little place : if we couldn't beat Willoughby we might as well shoot ourselves and get it over. Personally, he detested these village matches.

However, we got him down to the pitch in the evening, chiefly, I think, because Elsie said she was coming to look on—which, perhaps fortunately, she never did. The fellow wasn't altogether a bad bat. He showed some glimmerings of form, but he was a most unpleasant companion. He swaggered about most abominably, and the way he criticised Jonny's batting would have tried the temper of a saint. We had tossed for innings, and Jonny had first knock.

Young Hicks, a newcomer, presuming to teach Jonny how to bat—in the presence of the full village team.

‘For God’s sake, try and keep your bat straight,’ he called out. ‘Hasn’t any one ever taught you to play this game?’

It was a bit steep, quite apart from the language. We had always avoided anything like swearing on the cricket field. And then, every time Jonny put the ball up at all he would claim a wicket, if it was off his own bowling.

‘Point had that one,’ he would say, or ‘Easy chance in the slips,’ or ‘Out! if we’d had any one behind the wickets who could hold a catch.’

(That was one for me, because I was so annoyed with him that I dropped a snick on purpose.)

Jonny did not say anything, but I could see his face growing darker and darker. I don’t suppose he did it consciously, but when he retired and Hicks came in himself, resplendent in a new pair of pads and gloves and carrying a bat bound in several places, with a rubber grip (a thing rarely seen in Ashe in those days), he sent down one or two pretty fast balls. The third or fourth sent the middle stump flying: a few balls later one came swinging down the hill from leg and caught the batsman before he could get out of the way. On the thigh, just above the pad.

Young Hicks threw down his bat and danced around, in what most of the spectators seemed to consider an undignified and rather amusing fashion. It would have been more amusing but for the language he employed. We were not used to that sort of thing on the Ashe cricket ground.

‘I say, steady on!’ Percy Cudden remonstrated. As captain of the team he felt it his duty to interfere. But Hicks was fairly beside himself. Who the hell was he to start in, and who the devil did he think he

was talking to, and did he think he had come down there to be maimed for life? Call that thing a pitch! And he limped off at last, taking his things with him, and avowing his unalterable belief that the damned swine had got him down there on purpose to break his leg.

'Well, well,' said Percy, the philosopher, 'I suppose some of them are made like that and can't help it. But I'm not surprised they didn't want to keep him any longer at Eton. He's not what I should call really sociable.'

And he put his pads on to go and take a knock himself. We had no nets at Ashe, but in the evenings when most of the team came down to the ground for practice we used to take turns batting, about ten minutes each, whether we got out or not. Reggie Hicks never honoured us again on the cricket field. We had a long consultation on the point whether he should be asked to play in the Willoughby match. Both Percy and I were against it, but Jonny thought that in deference to the Canon's wishes he should be invited to play. So he was, but he declined with curtness.

'Catch me playing a match on that pitch!' he said. 'It's a death-trap.'

So that was all we saw of the young man as a cricketer. Indeed, he avoided us altogether for some time afterwards, going about the country on a brand-new and very shiny bicycle, beside which our old things looked more than commonly dingy. For we all had bicycles now, and even Percy's was no longer new. A great tall thing it was, with a 54-inch front wheel, hollow forks and backbone, ball bearings throughout. (How we used to examine the specifications in those catalogues, arguing the merits of different sorts of brakes, and whether it was good to have tyres wired on or not! Much as we do now, I suppose, with motor-cars.) I

remember it used to be one of our usual troubles, the way in which those old solid tyres used to come off, wrap themselves round the wheel like coiling serpents, and eventually catch in the fork and send us clattering on to the hard road over the handle-bars. A red-hot poker was the best medicine for that trouble.

III

The next thing that comes up before my mind is the Village Club. This, of course, was Percy's idea, and I have some faint recollection of the way in which it came about. There had been a fight in the village, outside the Bassett Arms, which was one of the three public-houses adorning our main street. Nothing of the sort had been known in Ashe for many years. Bagley, the gardener, brought the news. In his opinion Tom Wood, who had been the aggressor, had got more than he bargained for. He would not be doing work at the quarries for three or four days to come.

'Just fancy!' said Miss Mooney, when she heard the news. 'Elsie and I were down there only a few minutes before. We might have walked right into the middle of it.'

We were sitting at dinner. An autumnal evening, some time in October. I can't quite remember when we had begun late dinners, but I suppose it was soon after Percy came. Dressing for that function dated, I imagine, from the appearance of Reggie Hicks. I can still see him sitting there opposite me, turned out in the most faultless style, tail coat and white tie, and looking really rather well. There was no getting over it, the fellow had an air about him.

'If Miss Strange had been there,' said Percy gallantly, 'there could have been no fight.'

'But they might have begun already,' said Miss

Mooney, who would always have everything thoroughly explained—especially if she thought there was a compliment to Elsie concealed in it somewhere.

‘He means they would have stopped,’ put in Hicks. ‘Blinded by the light of her eyes, I suppose.’

There was something extraordinarily offensive in the way he said this. I could sense a sort of electric disturbance in the air. Elsie may have felt it herself, for she stepped in quickly.

‘Thank you very much,’ she put in her word. ‘All the same, I’m just as glad I wasn’t there. I hate fighting.’

And it seemed to me as though she said it with a hidden meaning, and the others knew it. At any rate, Jonny, who was sitting next me, turned to his food again, and the slight flush that had sprung to Percy’s cheek began to fade away.

‘The evenings are getting longer,’ said my father, pursuing his own line of thought, as usual, ‘and there’s nothing for them to do. We ought to find them something, now the cricket’s over.’

Up went Miss Mooney’s hands in protest. ‘My dear Canon! As though you hadn’t done enough already, and more than enough. Besides, Tom Wood was always quarrelsome. I remember he used to fight at school.’

Then it was that Percy suddenly became enthusiastic. I never remember any one so quick to take fire as Percy. It is true he sometimes burned out rather quickly too. But you should have seen the way his eye kindled when something struck him in which he thought there might be possibilities.

‘I don’t see why we shouldn’t start a real Parish Club,’ said Percy, all animation at the thought. ‘Papers and a library of decent books, and so forth. Chess and draughts, and perhaps a billiard-table, in time. There’s that old barn of William Clarke’s,

down at the bottom of the hill, hasn't been used for the last ten years.'

Young Hicks gave a sudden and very unpleasant laugh.

'Good Lord! Cudden starting a Y.M.C.A. on his own.'

But this time nobody took the least notice. Percy looked at him, with a casual glance, as though he were some insignificant insect accidentally discovered straying across his path. After all, why should we allow ourselves to be disturbed by the interruptions of an outsider? Hicks did not belong to us any longer. We had done our best to assimilate him, but he preferred to keep aloof. Very well then. Let him!

But Miss Mooney kindled: she generally had some enthusiasm to spare for Percy's new ideas.

'Oh, Canon, what an excellent plan! And that old barn of William Clarke's, too. Why did we never think of that, I wonder?'

'And what, precisely, do you suggest we should do with it now we have thought of it?' My father spoke in his quiet way, with his usual faint air of one who has outlived all enthusiasms, but can still be amused at the follies of his kind. It is the common refuge of the dreamer, who has learned to be sceptical of all dreams, including his own.

But Percy Cudden was the Practical Man.

'Hand it over to me for a month, sir, and I think I can start it on a paying basis. I wonder I never thought of that barn. Of course it's the very thing.'

He paused, his eyes alight with satisfaction. I never knew any one with so constructive an imagination as Percy's. In his mind's eye he was already busy with innumerable details, planning out remarkable schemes. I had not the faintest idea of what he meant to do with that barn, but I could see his brain was revolving gigantic plans.

'How am I to hand it over?' said my father mildly. 'It isn't mine. And, even for a parish club, I don't see my way to buying it. I expect Clarke would want at least a hundred for it—probably more. Mr. Clarke has a very keen sense of the value of property—especially if it is his own.'

'I expect he'd let it for seven or eight pounds a year,' said Percy hopefully. 'I'm certain he would, sir. May I go over and deal with him? I believe I can see my way to starting this thing and running it without any expense at all. I don't see why we shouldn't make a profit, with any luck.' And he looked round the table with the eye of a commander-in-chief, as though appraising our respective values as coadjutors in his scheme.

My father leaned back in his chair, chuckling quietly. Percy Cudden always amused him.

'Excellent, my dear Percy! I confess I love to hear you optimists, occasionally. Well, I will run the risk for one year, if you like. I give you permission to hire the barn for that period, if you can induce Clarke to let you have it for, let us say, eight pounds. I'll make myself responsible for that much.'

Upon which up went Miss Mooney's hands again. The Canon rashly making himself responsible for another seven or eight pounds! As though money grew on the hedges. And Elsie over eighteen—just at that age when a little money judiciously expended on clothes and social functions might make all the difference in the world.

'Oh, Canon! Do you really think we ought? With all your expenses.'

'Bless the woman!' This was one of my father's favourite expressions now. 'Why, Miss Mooney, I thought you were one of Percy's backers. You were saying just now what an excellent plan it was, and two minutes later you are trying to retreat. Let us see at

all events what Percy can do for us. Have you no faith in him ? ’

‘ Oh, but indeed yes, Canon. I think he is wonderful.’ And she turned to the young man with a propitiating smile. Miss Mooney had always had the greatest faith in Percy, but there was never any telling exactly what he might be doing next. One had to watch him carefully, in case—— And of course, in matters of money one could hardly expect him to see things exactly as we did. He was not a natural-born economist.

‘ Well, Cudden, here ’s a real chance for you to show what you can do.’ Young Hicks was putting his oar in again. He was quite irrepressible, that fellow. You might think you had shut him up for an hour or two, at least, but he would be certain to shove to the front with some sneering remark before five minutes had passed. The superior manner with which he produced his comments was hard to bear. The only way to deal with them was to take no notice whatsoever. We discovered that plan before he had been with us more than a few weeks.

IV

The plan that Percy had in his mind was, of course, a Theatrical Performance. He had always hankered after doing something of the kind under better conditions than we usually found.

‘ You couldn’t do anything really worth while in that old schoolroom,’ he complained. ‘ It never felt right, somehow. It never *smelt* right, if you know what I mean.’

I knew, perfectly. That subtle scent, as though compounded of hair-oil and corduroy trousers, that hung perpetually about our village schoolroom, was enough to curb the fine flow of any imagination. And

again, there was always the sense that our tenancy of the place was only temporary—a makeshift: that the next morning it would be back again in its old routine with its desks and blackboards and the rest.

‘Those maps on the wall, too,’ said Percy. ‘And the globes. They never would even put them away for one night. Little things like that spoil the illusion.’

We were down at the barn a day or two later, looking round to see what could be done with it.

‘I don’t see why we shouldn’t have a regular stage here,’ said Percy. ‘I mean something permanent, with dressing-room behind and everything complete. It’s a biggish place, you know. I made it out to be well over sixty feet when I went over it with old Clarke.’

‘Have you fixed it up with him yet?’

‘What do you think? I knew I could manage him all right. Percy Cudden is a Man of Business, I tell you. We have agreed to rent it for one year, with option of purchase subsequently for one hundred pounds in cash. Of course, it’s not in the pink of condition, so to speak. I’m relying on Jonny to help put it straight. The roof wants a few slates.’

‘The floor’s pretty bad, too,’ I said, prodding about with my stick. There were several rotten patches.

‘We must get the village on to it,’ announced Percy cheerfully. Little things of that sort never worried him seriously.

‘The floor isn’t as bad as it looks,’ said Jonny, who was the expert of the party. What he didn’t know of building and carpentry and the allied trades, we felt, could hardly amount to much. Half an hour later he had borrowed a ladder and was crawling about the roof on the outside, testing it here and there. He decided he could manage it all right by himself, if he got hold of a few slates and a hammer and nails. As to the floor, John Arnold could let us have a few

seasoned planks. We should have to employ him to put up a platform at the far end.

They were an astonishing pair, those two. I used to go about with them and look on, but I cannot honestly say that my presence was ever of the slightest use to them. As to Reggie Hicks, he spent most of his time by himself, up in his room or riding about the country on his bicycle. He did not associate with the rest of us, though for a short time he appeared anxious to cultivate my society. I had a suspicion that he was trying to divide us into factions, for I am quite sure he never cared for me personally in the least degree. But, in a sufficiently cautious manner, he used to try and sound me as to what I really thought of the other two.

‘This fellow Cudden,’ he would say. ‘What’s he trying to get at, d’you suppose? Is he really keen on this sort of muck, or is it all a pose?’

‘He’s very keen on theatricals, if that’s what you mean,’ I answered, rather coldly.

‘Oh, that’s it, is it? Going to get up a stock company, eh? Call it the Barnstormers, I suppose.’ Which wasn’t too bad. I told Percy afterwards, and he promptly adopted the name. He was never above picking up a good idea from anybody.

‘And this fellow Waring, where does he come in?’

I said Jonny could do most things, at a pinch.

‘Son of the village blacksmith, wasn’t he?’

Yes, he was. Not that it made any difference. He had always been my greatest friend. So was Percy Cudden, for that matter—or my second greatest, to be exact.

‘Curious family,’ said Reggie Hicks. And for some days afterwards he threw out dark hints from time to time about the inadvisability of mixing with fellows who did not belong to your own social set. The Stranges, for instance, came of a good stock. He was kind enough to admit that our family was all right.

But Cudden ! A mere manufacturer of stockings in a provincial town. And Waring ! No doubt very good fellows both, but what had we in common with them ?

I did not like the fellow, but for the honour of the house I felt I had to be civil with him. Looking back now, I often wonder whether I may not have been secretly a little flattered by the assumption that we were of a superior clay to the other two. Of course I would not have let him see that, for worlds. I naturally adopted the line that they were my friends, and that was enough : besides, what sensible person in these days cared a hang about the accident of birth ? (And in my own mind, of course, I thought it infernal cheek of the grandson of a fraudulent contractor to have anything to say on such a subject at all.)

But it did actually come about for a short time that we were, more or less, separated into two camps. Jonny and Percy Cudden were going about together all the while, getting the barn ready, and I was no good at that sort of job at all. Also, Hicks and I were working together at classics, while the other two were by way of being mathematicians. I rather hated it, but after all one could not well leave the man entirely alone. Generally it happened as the winter came on that he and I were the only two to join Elsie and Miss Mooney at afternoon tea. My father seldom spent any time over this function : he would just come in for a minute or two, drink his cup and return to the study. But Reggie hung about the drawing-room a lot. It was only natural, for we must have made the place pretty dull for him outside.

V

They certainly worked hard at that barn, the other two, and got the village to help them as well, to some purpose. All sorts of unpaid workers came and did

little jobs there at the bidding of Percy, 'exercising a general supervision,' to use his favourite phrase. And Jonny got the roof water-tight, and turned gaily to putting new boards in the floor and helping John Arnold with the platform and the arrangements for scenery and curtains and so forth. Elsie would look in now and then, throw the strenuous pair a word or two of commendation, and follow Miss Mooney out again. And at meals the Canon would occasionally descend from his dreams for a moment to inquire how things were getting on.

'Well, Percy,' he would say, 'how is Clarke's barn looking now, by the way?'

'Very like a barn,' muttered young Hicks under his breath. 'Cudden's going to have a rat-hunt there soon, I hope.'

Percy disregarded him blandly.

'We shall have it ready by Christmas all right, sir,' he announced cheerfully. 'Or early in the new year, at any rate. It's getting on fine.'

'And what are you going to open with when it is ready?' asked Miss Mooney.

'That's one thing we have to settle. We must hold a council some evening. I want you and Miss Strange to join us, and we'll all talk it over together. You see, I want this to be a really big thing. We simply can't afford to have a failure.'

'No, indeed!' Miss Mooney concurred, her grizzled locks bobbing up and down with excitement. Not that she really considered such a catastrophe probable with Percy Cudden in charge. He had the faculty of inspiring faith. And she loved the thought of a secret conclave, with Elsie in attendance and herself there to watch over her and make quite sure that nothing untoward happened.

'Let's have it to-morrow evening,' suggested Elsie. 'Then we can all be there.' And she gave Reggie

Hicks one of her looks, at which the other two looked a little sour. However, we all turned up in the drawing-room after dinner the day after. That is to say, Miss Mooney, Elsie, and the four of us. My father preferred to read in his study.

Percy, of course, opened the discussion.

'What we want,' he said, 'is something that will bring in the neighbourhood. I mean to say, the parish by itself won't be enough this time. I feel we've got to make money out of this show somehow.'

Then we all began to suggest things—pretty fatuous things too, for the most part. Miss Mooney soared to Shakespeare, Elsie wanted something quite modern, I proposed something classic, in the Greek style.

Reggie Hicks, as usual, intimated his opinion that we were all talking rubbish.

'What you want,' he graciously explained, 'is some steady old thing, not too difficult. A general favourite. Why not *She Stoops to Conquer*? Rattling good old piece. I played young Marlow myself once at home.'

Nobody said anything at once, but it was quite clear from Percy's face that he did not intend him to play the lead with us. However, by degrees we recovered ourselves far enough to indicate that we did not want the Barnstormers (that was their official title now) to follow quite so tamely in the traditional lines as all that. Every team of amateurs that had ever acted since the days of the Flood had done it. One must draw the line somewhere.

'I want to see Elsie as Kate Hardcastle,' said Reggie, with the most careless unconcern.

I believe we all looked at him with our mouths open—we three boys, I mean—wondering for a moment whether we had heard aright. Of course I used to speak of her as Elsie, but Percy, friendly as we had become, only used the Christian name very rarely and, as it were, by accident. I don't believe Jonny Waring

had ever spoken of her as Elsie in his life. It did seem a bit of a liberty from a newcomer like Hicks. But I am bound to say Elsie herself did not seem to mind. Nor, for that matter, did Miss Mooney.

'Very good of you,' said my sister, laughing. 'I'm not sure that I'm very keen on it, all the same.'

'It's the very part for you,' Reggie went on, quite undaunted. 'Don't you think so, Miss Mooney? Just the face and figure for it, I should say.'

It sounds absurd, but you must remember these were the days of Her Majesty, Victoria the Good. To us, once more temporarily dumb, a young lady's figure was a matter not to be mentioned, in her presence, by comparative strangers.

We half expected a glance from Miss Mooney to scorch and shrivel up this rash intruder. But he actually got the old lady to back him up, in a sort of way. And then Elsie herself veered round. She began to see herself in the part.

'I'm not sure it mightn't do, after all,' she said, considering. And Percy had to intervene hastily, to preserve his waning authority.

'Not this time, Miss Strange. I want to keep that in reserve. Perhaps later on, when we've established ourselves, so to speak. At Easter, I dare say. This time I'm really keen on making a splash. I want something original.'

'Better write it yourself.' Reggie generally contrived to find the nastiest thing possible to say—and to say it in the most unpleasant manner.

'Well, why not?' Jonny Waring had been sitting there, in the background, getting more and more angry, and there was a tone in his voice when he rapped out these words that almost made me jump. For a minute I really thought we were going to have trouble. But Elsie turned it off somehow. She had

a quickness of perception that one could not help admiring.

After we broke up we had a sort of informal meeting in my room. We three, I mean, for Reggie had taken himself off to his own aristocratic apartment.

‘That fellow is going to be an infernal nuisance,’ pronounced Percy, after profound reflection.

‘I suppose you get like that,’ I suggested, ‘if you begin by being a baronet’s son and go on by getting sacked from a public school.’

Jonny stood in front of the fireplace with his hands in his pockets, saying nothing. At that time of his life Jonny never did say much unless he felt a strong call to do so.

‘What do you think of him, Jonny?’ said our leader.

But Jonny was not going to be drawn. He just stood there and considered things, rocking slightly to and fro on his feet.

‘When we do get this club going,’ he announced at last, as though on a different line of thought altogether, ‘the first thing I want to get is a few pairs of boxing gloves.’

Chapter VI

The Barnstormers

I

I DO not propose to go into all the details of that wonderful entertainment which we produced eventually, after no end of preparation and argument, in the week following Christmas. Percy Cudden did it pretty nearly all on his own. The more I reflect on that young gentleman the more remarkable I find him. Do we ever get youths now, I wonder, with such an abundance of energy in their composition? Of course I helped—we all helped more or less, I suppose—and he would have it that I was responsible for the

bulk of the play we acted, if indeed it can be called a play. But I was not in the least responsible, really: I was merely his instrument. He must have spent hours walking up and down my room after the others had gone to bed talking it over, trying hard to infect me with a little of his own enthusiasm.

In these days, I take it, the thing would be called a Revue. Percy wanted it to include everything—to touch lightly but firmly on all the topics of interest in the immediate neighbourhood, besides dealing with politics and sport, and any burning questions of the day. I remember we paid particular attention to Feminine Emancipation. No doubt all this was partly due to a recent study of Aristophanes, for we had just been reading *Lysistrata* and the *Ecclesiazusae*.

As a matter of fact, we did work in an immense amount of allusive material. I came across an old copy of the thing only the other day, and it fairly astonished me. I had no idea that our fund of general information at that time was so large.

It was Percy again, of course, who got the play printed, for he never troubled himself about petty economies. The Fleckney printer did it for us—old Baxter, who used to run the *Fleckney Gazette*. Very roughly, but still it was printed, and stitched in paper covers, and even exposed for sale, at his shop in the High Street. I shall never forget my sensations when I first saw the thing stacked up on his counter. There were even one or two specimens in the window. He had the face to charge a shilling net for the booklet, and it is my private opinion that he did quite well out of it, for I don't believe he ever accounted to Percy for a penny of the proceeds. Perhaps he took something off the charge for posters and other advertising. I need not say that all the business arrangements were left in Percy's hands.

Certainly it cannot be said that we failed to give

Elsie a good chance. 'Woman Up to Date' was our title, modestly followed by our initials—R.S.P.C. This 'Shakespearean Medley,' as we called it, was practically a succession of parodied scenes from the chief plays, in which we naturally called upon Elsie to represent in succession most of the big female parts. Portia gave her the best opening: as Portia she had to conduct a breach of promise action on her own behalf, into which we worked a lot of topical stuff. Then we switched her on to Rosalind, in the Forest of Arden, where she was a champion lady lawn-tennis player (there were no golfers then), and finally she came on as Ophelia. I fancy we did not make much out of Ophelia, but the other two parts were not at all bad. I shall never forget her coming on as Rosalind. She wore a tunic and a pair of knee-breeches (very daring in those days) of dark green and gold, and fairly turned the heads of every male creature within range. Portia, of course, was Comedy: Rosalind was just a chance of displaying Charm: Ophelia was meant to give an opening for Pathos. I believe she did it quite well, too. Some of our older parishioners undoubtedly wept. But I never laid very much stress on Ophelia. Elsie was always better when there was not too much demand for real feeling.

Percy Cudden showed himself on this occasion the great organiser that he undoubtedly was. I don't know what secret means he employed, but somehow or other he got it noised abroad all over the neighbourhood that this show of ours was worth coming some way to see. The *Fleckney Gazette*, of course, was in his pocket: it was easy to get them to send over a special reporter, whom he assisted to produce nearly a page of the most appalling stuff. But the Leicester press was another matter: there he had to work strings that I never saw. If there had only been the facilities for photographic reproduction then that

there are now, Elsie would have figured in every paper in the Midlands.

He ran the show for a full week, and might have carried it on longer had he been allowed a free hand. The last few performances he was charging five shillings for the first four rows of the stalls (as he called them) and getting the money. Every one of any importance within a radius of six or seven miles came to see the Ashe Theatricals. Probably they are talked about in the district to this day.

It was Elsie and he who were responsible for the show. All the rest of us were the merest supers—hewers of wood and drawers of water. We filled in, so to speak. Even Reggie Hicks, who had talked so big a little time before, was content to do what he was told without more than an occasional sneer. He had the sense to recognise that he was up against something rather out of the common. The two Sterndales, Elsie and Percy Cudden—those four were our stars: the rest of the cast did not really matter: they might have interchanged their parts without any one being much the wiser. And of the four stars Elsie was easily the chief. It was as though Percy had deliberately contrived the whole thing for her glorification. (I believe he had, really: the Village Hall of Recreation was only a blind for his activities.)

When all expenses had been met, including Baxter's bill for printing, which was a pretty heavy item too, we showed a clear profit of something like twenty pounds.

'That will do to start your old club off with,' he said cheerfully. I can see him now, his red head bent over the little book in which he kept his accounts, such as they were—I don't think Percy was ever a good mathematician—with a pile of loose money on the table before him, which he could never bring to the same amount twice running. 'I'm going to take this

in to the Canon straight away, before we lose it. Come on, Rudolpho.'

We went in together, to discover my father leaning up against the mantelpiece of the study in his favourite attitude of dreamy contemplation.

'I thought I'd better bring you in the proceeds of our dramatic performance, sir,' said Percy, putting the money down in a neat series of little piles—I suppose in order to make the amount look more imposing. 'I think we might have made it nearly thirty, if you had felt inclined to let it run a few days longer. It was just beginning to get known.'

My father looked at us and then at the money in that absent-minded way of his, as though he were trying to recall himself from a distance.

'Ah, Percy. Our Universal Provider!' His gaze wandered back to the neat little stacks of coin. 'And out of all this has to come—what?'

Percy could not help swelling slightly with conscious virtue as he replied.

'Nothing, Canon. It's all net profit. I've paid for everything, including the preliminary work, getting the place in order, and so on. What there was to pay. The parish were very good about helping. And Jonny, of course, did an awful lot of work. If we could have only run the show for a few more days the additional takings would have been all clear profit.'

He was still a trifle sore in his own mind at having been made to close down at the height of a successful run.

'Ah!' said my father. 'Would it? I wonder. You take no account in your admirably compiled balance-sheet, my dear Percy, of anything but the material side of pounds, shillings, and pence. But there is also another side.' He stood there, his hand on my shoulder, looking down at us benevolently, but as though his mind were really far away, solving some abstruse scientific problem.

The honest Percy stood silent for a moment, a trifle mystified. Then he recovered his native readiness.

'I don't think there's anything wrong with the moral side, sir,' he said cheerfully. 'We were—very careful to keep anything of that sort out of it.'

He blushed slightly, the ingenuous young fellow, when my father began chuckling at this.

'You were? Good, my dear Percy. Excellent. But it was not exactly of that I was thinking, but of the effect of—shall we say applause and admiration? These two children of mine, for example: is this going to lead them into strange paths? Yours, we must remember, is a curiously stimulating mind. However, time will show. And now, what do you suggest should be done with all this money?'

For the moment Percy Cudden had no answer ready. It was I who replied.

'Jonny was saying it would be a good thing to get a few pairs of boxing gloves,' I said.

'I thought we might keep the platform at one end, sir,' put in Percy, his flow of ideas suddenly restored. 'It's just the thing if we want to give any sort of a show—ininitely better than the schoolroom. And then we might fit up a gymnasium of sorts, and have a room partitioned off where they could read and write if they wanted. I don't see why we should not run to a billiard-table, in time.'

II

We got our boxing gloves, so persuasive was Percy's eloquence. I suspect the gallant fellow must have spent some of his own money over that club of ours, for we started off in a blaze of glory with quite a respectable library of books and one or two of the cheaper periodicals. Most of the shelves, of course, were put up by Jonny, while Percy and I scoured the

surrounding country on our bicycles to pick up derelict literature. We got a very mixed bag, I must say, but it made a good show on the walls. That was supposed to be my special department, and I took no end of trouble over it. I spent days over drawing up a catalogue.

We had the Waverley Novels, I remember, in three stout volumes bound in red cloth, the whole series complete, and uncommonly awkward to handle. That was contributed by old Renny, of Brockington, and must have come down to him from his father, for I don't suppose he had ever read one of them in his life. Hunting was his one interest in this world. Then we had a few scattered volumes of Dickens—nothing like a complete set—and several Poetical Works, generally in faded morocco binding, probably school prizes once upon a time. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tom Moore, Longfellow, Mrs. Hemans, Rogers, and Crabbe, with a few of even less note. And several three-volume novels, long ago forgotten; and a number of the smaller and cheaper variety that we used to call 'yellow-backs'; and a few rows of ancient worthies like Goldsmith, Addison, or Dr. Samuel Johnson, bound in half-calf, and surrendered not unwillingly from the shelves of some squire's house where the ladies would not be sorry to see something lighter in tone and less dingy in colouring.

Organising this department of mine was no easy task. I had no experience of such matters, and had to devise my own way of doing things. But it worked out well enough. The young men and maidens of the village (and a sprinkling of the older folk too) used to come and borrow from our strange assortment, while I wrote all their names down laboriously in my book, and the stamping of our rising gymnasts resounded through the old barn.

As to the boxing, we soon got to work on that,

Percy leading the way, as usual. He secured an instructor—a hefty young fellow from Leicester, called Marsh, who came over two evenings a week and superintended our efforts. None of us had ever been taught anything about the noble art before, except young Hicks, who posed as an expert and refused to have anything to do with further instruction as being beneath his dignity. But you may be sure Percy Cudden did not take long before he knew all the attitudes, at all events. His imitative genius was such that after the first few lessons you could almost have sworn he was an instructor himself.

We all put in a good deal of our time at that club for the next few weeks, giving the show a good start, as Percy phrased it. All, that is to say, except Reggie Hicks. That fellow never cared about taking part in anything the rest of us did. We saw surprisingly little of him outside our working hours. He generally vanished after luncheon, and often did not reappear amongst us until it was time to make a hasty change for dinner.

And all this time I could not help seeing that the other three young men were like moths fluttering round a candle. It was not unamusing, in a way, to watch Elsie, and observe how she managed them all. I could never tell from her manner if she cared for any one of the three, but it was clear that she liked having them at her feet. She played them off against each other. I am not blaming her for it. Ashe must have been a terribly dull place for a girl, especially for one with her qualities.

She could do what she liked with any one in the rectory, except possibly myself. Miss Mooney would never have dreamed of refusing anything she asked. Between them they had turned the upstairs room in which we used to have our lessons together—the Old Schoolroom, we called it—into a sort of boudoir, with

Percy's invaluable assistance. He used to give them a good deal of his company up there most afternoons after tea, when Hicks was away on his private affairs. He painted portraits of Elsie, and some of Mooney as well. I came across one of these works in an old box the other day.

Miss Mooney's sympathies, I suspect, were rather on the side of the prospective baronet. But she had a kindness for Percy. He was an engaging fellow, and he was also (as she no doubt expressed it to herself) so thoroughly safe. You could be quite certain he would never think of permitting himself any undue familiarity. Behind his lively manner there was always something—you might call it a vein of chivalry or possibly mere shyness—that the old lady had the sense to recognise.

'Mr. Cudden is one of Nature's gentlemen,' I have heard her say.

About Reggie Hicks there was nothing visible of this shrinking timidity. And without any question he had the pull over Percy in some important points. In looks, for instance. He had a slight, well-built figure, small and delicate features: in fact, the sort of appearance that attracts a good many women. Compared with him Percy, with his flamboyant head of red hair and his broad, good-natured face, looked like a knock-about comedian. And Reggie possessed a manner that was at once quiet and assured. Percy's was assured too, but with a difference. A perspicacious stranger would have said, comparing the two, that Percy might very likely be the better companion, but—was he quite a gentleman? And it would be difficult for me, much as I liked him, to say that he was—quite. He had not been to a public school, and he pronounced some words a little curiously, and perhaps his manner in general society was rather obviously artificial. I hate putting these things

down, and I readily admit that I never noticed them until I had the opportunity of comparing the two styles. And all the time, in everything that really matters, I am bound to say that Percy came easily first, and the future baronet nowhere.

None of us knew, occupied with our work as we generally were after dinner, that Reggie Hicks spent most of that time in the boudoir with the two ladies. We supposed that he preferred solitude, and always thought of him (if we thought of him at all) as working or possibly reading French novels in his own room, which he was accustomed to use as a private study. It seems that he had got into the way of looking in there when he felt he had worked long enough. And as long as Mooney was there, of course, it was all right

III

And then, at the beginning of March, it happened that Miss Mooney got a chill or something, and was laid up for two or three days, which led to Elsie approaching me. It struck me as curious at the time, for we had never been exactly intimate since early childhood. It seemed to me that since we had begun to have pupils in the house, we had hardly spoken to each other on any but the most commonplace subjects.

She caught me one Sunday, after luncheon, as I was going to Jonny's room along the passage upstairs.

'Look here!' she said, much in her usual off-hand way, 'I don't often ask you for anything, but you might occasionally come and sit with me after dinner. You and Percy, and Jonny too, if he likes.'

I looked at her in some little surprise. This was very unlike my sister, as I knew her.

'All right. I dare say we could manage it now and then—when we've finished our work. Are you feeling a bit lonely?'

‘What do you suppose, with Mooney in bed, ill?’

‘What about Reggie Hicks?’ I asked.

I need hardly say that I meant this perfectly innocently. It had only occurred to me that perhaps we ought to ask him to come along too. I had no idea then that he had been making a practice of going there every evening. But Elsie suddenly flushed, and turned off to her own room with the air of one who had been deeply insulted.

‘I never asked him to come,’ she said with vehemence. ‘I hate the beast.’ And she disappeared into her room without giving me time to say anything in reply. I don’t know what I should have said if she had. Frankly, it took me some time to make out what she was driving at.

I thought it over during most of that evening’s service. We sat opposite each other, Elsie and I, in the chancel stalls, she on the north side, so as to be near the organ and lend support to the choir, while Jonny, Percy, and I were on the south, together with John Arnold, the bearded carpenter with the tenor voice. We three, in fact, had been placed there originally by Miss Mooney, with some idea of forming a body of male voices for the choir, and Percy Cudden always went through all the motions of singing with great energy. But chiefly, I suspect, we were placed there so that we might be out of the way—and at the same time have a good view. We could see Miss Mooney’s exhibit—which was Elsie—from a convenient distance. She would have liked to keep her in a sort of glass case—inspection only by approved visitors, with tickets.

But when Reggie Hicks came, there was no more room for him on our side, so she was forced to take charge of him in order to balance things. And there he sat now, in the seat between the organ and the altar-rails, which just held three comfortably. As a

rule Miss Mooney interposed her ample person between him and Elsie, but that evening he could sit back in his corner, turning round a trifle to the right, and watch her at his ease. I noticed that he did so most of the time we were sitting down.

And I sat opposite, watching the two, and wondering what Elsie could have meant. Because as she had moved past Reggie she had certainly smiled and said something that caused him to smile back. There seemed to be a secret understanding, of sorts, between the pair. What did she mean when she talked of 'hating the beast'?

I was quite aware that I did not know very much about women in those days: very possibly I am not much better informed now. But I knew something of my classics, and it seemed to me that those writers had been working on a solid foundation when they professed to regard woman in general as an inexplicable being, various and mutable as a spring wind, to-day soft and caressing, to-morrow icy and blustering.

I gave a mental shrug of the shoulders.

Probably she had meant nothing at all. A momentary annoyance at something the fellow had said or done, or omitted to say or do, just before. Still, I supposed I should have to do something about it. I looked covertly at Percy's florid face during the sermon, and wondered what he would think of it when I gave him the hint. And Jonny, too.

IV

I got hold of Elsie again, after service, just as she was going into Mooney's room to see how she was—and probably to tell her who was at church and who was not. Miss Mooney could not get through a Sunday without knowing that.

'I say, what did you mean by that?' I asked

hurriedly, with all the bluntness of youth. 'Has he been doing anything, that fellow?'

And then she just looked at me as though I did not exist, in a way that I always disliked intensely. As though she were interested in something just over my left shoulder.

'What *are* you talking about, my dear boy?' And she puckered up her forehead as though she were really trying to guess what I meant. Then she slipped into Mooney's room before I could think of any adequate retort.

When we reassembled at supper—it was always supper with us on Sunday evenings—she came down a different person altogether. She sat at the head of the table, in Miss Mooney's place, and played the part of that amiable old lady to the life. It was one of the funniest things I have ever seen. Elsie was a born mimic. And Percy Cudden was remarkably quick at seizing his cue. He could enter into that sort of thing at a moment's notice, inventing a regular little duologue as he went along.

I don't think my father paid much attention to what was going on. He sat silent in his seat, looking rather worn and tired. He generally was rather silent on Sundays. But Reggie Hicks, though sternly refusing to laugh at anything Cudden said or did, smiled once or twice at Elsie's imitation. In his patronising way he even applauded.

'By Jove, Elsie, you've got the old girl to the life,' he admitted. And I felt, rather than saw, the other two wince as he spoke. They simply hated this comparative newcomer speaking to her in this familiar fashion. And I could see that she saw it too. Somehow or other she contrived to make the two veterans feel that she was really on their side and against the recruit, only tolerating him from necessity; and she managed this without saying a word and without

letting Reggie notice anything either. Jonny and old Cudden were soothed and satisfied, for the moment. That fellow was merely making a fatuous ass of himself. One of these days, when no one else was present, they might have something to say to him about it. But it could wait. There was no immediate hurry.

It did not occur to me to suggest to the others that we should go up to her room that night after supper. On Sundays, what with evening service and so on, it was generally pretty late before we got through. I thought she would be sure to go and sit with old Mooney for half an hour or so and then go to bed. We three were sitting smoking in my room, which we used as a common study, and Percy was yarning away as to what he meant to do with his next theatrical performance, when I heard a light and rapid step coming along the passage outside. The door opened, and Elsie came in.

I could see at once that she was in the deuce of a temper. I will say for Elsie that she did not often give herself away. She rarely showed signs of irritation—when there was any one about whose opinion she valued. But I could always tell when she was really in a rage. When I saw the pulse beating in her temples I knew it would be wise to let her alone for a while until she recovered. I noticed it then. And there was a vibration about the voice that was unusual: obviously she had not got it under perfect control.

‘Why didn’t you come up when I asked you?’ she began, turning to me. ‘I think you might have come. I don’t often ask you for anything.’

She stood there in the doorway, her hand on the china knob, with an expression that might have been that of a tragedy queen. Then suddenly she seemed to notice that the other two were there as well, and that they looked rather surprised. As indeed they

well might, for neither of them had ever seen Elsie in that room before.

Even Percy Cudden, generally so ready, was for the moment taken aback. I hesitated, not quite knowing what to say.

'I didn't know you wanted us to-night,' I explained lamely. 'I thought to-morrow——'

Percy recovered himself with an effort.

'I hope nothing is the matter,' he said, handing a chair to her with a flourish. There was always a touch of the stage about Percy's old-fashioned courtesy.

Elsie seemed to come to herself with a little laugh, as though she had suddenly found herself there without recollecting how it had all happened. I admit that in my heart I often found myself accusing Elsie of insincerity—which I hated. I found myself watching her for tricks of the stage: every time I detected one I noted it down in my mind and added it to the swelling list. The fact is, Elsie and I were never sympathetic: that was the real trouble, and probably very largely my fault. Yet all the time I could not help feeling a certain admiration for her. I felt it then, as she stood there wavering, the white rage in her face dying out and being replaced by a pretty confusion.

'Oh, it's nothing really,' she said. 'I didn't expect to find you all here.' She played with the handle of the door a moment as though wondering how to put it. 'I suppose I was a fool,' she confessed. 'I ought to know how to take care of myself by this time.'

I found myself registering the look she sent at old Cudden then, with those words.

'That would knock over pretty nearly any one,' I said to myself, sardonically. And she made a most delightful picture as she stood there, swaying a little, half nervous, one would say, and half-humorously sorry for herself.

Jonny Waring jumped up suddenly.

‘Is it that fellow Hicks?’

I assure you if I had not seen him I should not have recognised the voice. It sounded all strangled.

Elsie turned to him, now quite herself again, and smiling.

‘Oh, it’s all right, Jonny. I was—only upset for a minute. I expected you all to look in this evening, after what I said to Rudolf. Never mind! Good-night!’

And she was gone. We looked at each other in silence for perhaps ten seconds. Then Jonny spoke:

‘Come on. We must look into this.’

Percy raised his hand.

‘Wait half a minute. What’s it all mean?’ He turned to me. ‘What was that about her expecting us? What did she say to you?’

The two looked at me accusingly.

‘What did she say about Hicks?’ put in Jonny.

‘She said she hated the beast,’ I reported truthfully.

‘That’s good enough.’ Jonny led the way to the door.

‘Where are you off to?’ asked Percy. But he followed.

v

I went too, not seeing why I should be left behind, and curious to see how they would deal with the situation. We marched quietly along the passage and up the half-flight of stairs to Reggie’s room.

Our instinct had been correct. Reggie Hicks was there, lying on his bed, flat on his back, smoking a cigarette and gazing at the ceiling. He looked round lazily as we entered.

‘Gad!’ he said. ‘A troop cometh, as Holy Writ hath it. What’s up now, may I ask?’

Cudden opened his mouth to speak. But Jonny was in first.

'We don't mean to have you hanging about the schoolroom while Miss Mooney is away,' he explained quietly. 'You've been making a nuisance of yourself up there, and it has got to stop.'

This appeared to take Hicks in a weak spot. His leg gave a jerk, as though he were going to jump up. Then apparently he thought better of it. He continued to lie there, smoking.

'I wonder what the devil it has to do with you,' he said at last. Looking at him I could see the hand that held his cigarette shaking visibly, but he managed to preserve a sort of outward composure. 'Curious place this! The village blacksmith comes and tells me to keep out of the rectory drawing-room. Suppose I tell you to go back to your spreading chestnut tree and stay there! Eh? Damn you!'

He ended on a sharper note, as though he found it impossible to preserve any longer the air of surface politeness with which he had started.

Percy Cudden chimed in.

'Look here, Hicks, it's true enough. You've got to drop it. You've been annoying Miss Strange.'

Hicks burst into a cackle of high-pitched laughter.

'My sacred aunt! Here's old Percy Cudden doing the heavy. You should hear what Elsie says about you, Cudden. It might do you good. And what's Number Three got to say? Or is he just thrown in as a makeweight? Lending moral support, eh? You're a pretty lot, between you. I don't wonder you've bored Elsie to tears.'

Percy was beginning some angry retort, but Jonny put in his work first. He just stepped forward and caught hold of Hicks by his two feet before he saw what was coming. Then, with a stout pull, he brought him to the floor with a resounding bump. There was a good deal of kicking and threshing about, and, on the part of Hicks, a flow of bad language such

as I had never heard before. Percy and I got hold of them at last and managed to separate them, both a little the worse for wear, and panting for breath. They had managed to put in quite a nice little scrap on the floor for a minute or so.

'Shut up!' said Percy angrily. 'You're making noise enough to bring in the whole house. You, Hicks, if you must swear, try to swear like a gentleman. Look here, you'll have to fight over this. It's my affair.'

'I'm going to fight him first,' said Jonny, quietly, but very decidedly.

'I tell you it's my business. I have the right.' Percy went on explaining with some heat just why he claimed precedence, but he made no impression whatever on Jonny.

'You can do what you like afterwards,' he repeated. 'He's got to tackle me before he tries any one else.' He turned to Hicks, who was sitting on the edge of the bed. 'You agree, I suppose?'

'I don't know what the hell you think you're talking about. What do you expect to fight with? We're not in the Middle Ages.'

'If we go down to the Club to-morrow afternoon early it ought to be empty enough,' said Percy. I have no doubt he saw himself already staging the whole thing according to the most approved models. 'The fight will be with gloves. Queensberry Rules. Beginning at two o'clock.'

Hicks made no immediate response.

'I suppose we may rely upon you to be there?' Percy added in his best manner.

'You are the damnedest lot of idiots I ever saw,' Hicks burst out. 'Oh, I'll come if you like. I'm not afraid of the whole lot of you—stocking-maker, blacksmith, cripple. Take you on all together, if you prefer it.'

He was decidedly cheerful now—inclined to be insolent again. The gloves he did not mind. After all, he was the only one of us who had done any boxing at all before that year, and he thought he could do more or less what he liked with any of us at that. But Percy reddened angrily. His ideal in life was to do everything in the gentlemanly manner, with all the proper forms of chivalry, and to be called a stocking-maker struck him like an unfair blow.

He pulled himself together in order to call off his forces.

‘Very well, then. To-morrow at the Club at two. I’m sorry we can’t have it now, but the Canon wouldn’t like it on a Sunday evening.’

And we retired as ceremoniously as Percy Cudden could manage it, leaving Hicks to arrange his collar and tie, and compose his ruffled feelings as well as he could. I have no doubt he felt sore enough, not only with us but with Elsie. And, frankly, I have no idea to this day what he may have said or done to arouse her resentment. Very possibly nothing much. I think Elsie just at that time was not at all an easy girl to manage. Life must have seemed to her nothing but an unending round of petty repetitions, little parochial duties, assisting others in duties that had no interest for her whatsoever. What could she really care about choosing the hymns for Sunday, or superintending a choir practice, or going down the village with Miss Mooney to call on bedridden old women?

From sheer boredom I suspect that she picked up that bomb of hers and pitched it in the fire, to see what would happen. No doubt young Hicks had been a bit free, with Mooney away. And Elsie had always possessed a considerable sense of her own dignity.

Well, there it was, anyway. The bomb had been thrown, and she would now have the excitement of seeing what happened. I have no doubt she guessed

at once who would be her knight. Jonny's voice told her as much. His was the more determined character of the two: she knew well enough that with him in that mood something serious would be attempted. Percy Cudden was, by comparison, a formalist. He was all for doing everything in the orthodox fashion. He was ultra-civilised, whereas Jonny had sprung from the people, straight from the soil. And she wanted the feeling that some one might get really hurt. It made it so much more exciting.

I know that this sounds bitter, and I know also that I have no proof that she thought anything of the kind. In the old days there were ladies who provoked duels between their admirers, or so we are told, and as often as not finished up by marrying some one else altogether. Duels were a thing of the past, and this amusement was, when all is said, only a pale simulacrum of the real thing. It would do no one any serious harm—and she could always step down, graciously, at the critical moment and soothe the tumult she herself had raised.

With Mooney ill in bed there was nothing to do whatsoever. And she was not quite sure that she liked young Hicks—much. He was a little too sure of himself. He wanted a lesson.

*Chapter VII**The Great Fight*

I

ELSIE was consumed with curiosity the next morning. She felt certain that something was in the air, and would have given a good deal to know exactly what it was. I could see that clearly enough by her manner at breakfast, where, by the way, Miss Mooney reappeared, a little pale but determinedly bright and full of concern for the trouble she must have given

every one by forsaking her charge of household affairs. She took her place again at the end of the table, presiding over the big copper urn which had been its chief feature ever since I could remember. And Elsie sat opposite me, between the two rivals, Percy Cudden on one side and Hicks on the other.

She had waylaid me on the way down to prayers, evidently wanting to find out what we were going to do. I think she must have been waiting for me, for there she was in the passage as soon as I opened my door.

'I say,' she began hurriedly, 'I don't want you to take any notice of what I said yesterday. I dare say I was a little upset. Mooney's back again now.'

'Right! Just as you wish, of course.' I spoke drily. It was so like Elsie to suppose that she had only to express a preference, and anything that had happened last night could be wiped off the slate as though it had never taken place.

'I mean to say, I don't want any silly fuss made about it. You know what I mean. Not that I suppose there would be. . . .' She seemed a trifle confused. 'Did any of you see Reggie last night?'

'I believe there was some talk of paying him a formal visit.'

It was as though a slight cloud passed across her face. I knew, of course, that she hated being fenced with in any way.

'Did anything happen? Who went there? Did you go?' She rapped out her questions imperiously.

'Most of us were present.'

'Oh, you're impossible.' She tapped the floor impatiently with her foot. 'Why can't you answer reasonably when I ask a simple question? I only want to avoid trouble. Father's not at all well. Mooney's very anxious about him.'

But I was quite determined to give nothing away.

I gave it as my opinion that Mooney had never been anything but anxious about one or other of us since she had been at Ashe. And then some one was heard coming along the further corridor, and we separated. She had not got much out of me that time, I reflected with satisfaction. It would never do to have Mooney, or perhaps my father himself, coming down to the Club at the critical moment and interfering. The fight had to come off. I rather wanted to see it, too.

Jonny, of course, secretive fellow that he was, kept out of my way all that morning. I had intended to ask him what made him so determined to challenge young Hicks to mortal combat. As a rule, Cudden got his own way easily enough, for Jonny had never been the sort of chap to push himself forward, but this time all his eloquence had been in vain.

‘What do you suppose makes him so dead keen?’ I asked Percy. ‘He’s nothing much of a boxer, you know. I expect this fellow will give him all he can manage.’

‘He may not be much of a boxer, but he’s pretty tough,’ said Percy, hopefully. ‘All the same, I wish he’d let me tackle him first. Might have taken a little of the go out of Master Reggie.’

‘I ought to have taken him on myself, really.’ I looked at myself in the glass, with some disgust. It seemed as though I should never get to be a reasonable size. At that time I was just seventeen, and the merest weakling. When I went up to Cambridge I did not weigh more than seven stone six, and the Boat Club, overjoyed, persuaded me to act as coxswain for one of their Lent boats. Our first boat captain even went so far as to say I might get my blue. But I deserted the river when the cricket season came round.

This is merely by the way. Mind you, I think I had pluck enough to stand up to young Hicks for three or four rounds, and be knocked out, if need be.

But what good would it have done? I did not want Hicks to triumph. I thought it would do him all the good in the world to be punished a bit. The only trouble was that I did not exactly see where the punishment was coming from. Jonny was no boxer: I was quicker with the gloves than he was, myself. Still, he might get in a knock or two that hurt. Whereas Percy Cudden, if he had been allowed the honour, would have been all flourish and footwork and straight leads with the left—the sort of thing that would not seriously disturb a fly.

II

‘And what are you young people going to do this afternoon?’ said Miss Mooney as we sat at luncheon. She had been fussing about all the morning, anxious, I suppose, to make up for lost time. Except for an old brown shawl (which she wore over her shoulders as a sort of reminder that she was still technically on the sick list) she was much the same as ever, and perhaps even more inclined to conversation than usual after her enforced abstinence.

I felt a sort of oppression in my chest. I do not think I could have answered her. This approaching combat had got on my nerves: I should have jumped violently at any unusual or sudden sound. It was astonishing to me that the other three looked so natural. They did not seem in the least disturbed by the impending sword of battle.

Percy Cudden took up the challenge readily.

‘Always enough to do, Miss Mooney. I expect we shall go down to the Club for a bit to get it ready for this evening.’

‘What the parish would do without you I can’t think.’ Miss Mooney sighed and smiled. ‘Really, Canon, I think Percy is better than a curate, isn’t he?’

And I'm sure the Club is the most useful thing the village has had for years.'

'Stopped all fighting, I suppose,' said Reggie Hicks.

We all looked at him. What the deuce did the fellow mean by blurting out a sentence like that? Some way of getting out of the challenge, no doubt. Or did he want to get Elsie to know, and to interfere?

I found myself scrutinising her face. But there was not often much to be gleaned from that. If she did not want to give away what she felt, you could trust her to look as impassive as an ancient Egyptian. That pale face of hers, with its delicate contour, clear cut as a piece of Chinese ivory work, with the long, brown lashes hiding the eyes as she looked down discreetly on her plate, told nothing.

'I can't think why men ever fight,' she announced suddenly and surprisingly. She raised her eyes, and immediately her face seemed to light up. It altered altogether. I had been thinking of Tennyson's *Maud*.

Faultily faultless, splendidly regular, icily null.

Elsie often made me think of that line when she sat like that, her eyes downcast, the lashes delicately pencilled against the pale cheek. Percy, who had his sudden bursts of admiration, was just then taken with a Tennysonian fit, and had more or less infected me: we used to sit up late at night sometimes declaiming *Maud* to each other. (I have no doubt he too saw Elsie in every line of it.) And a year or so before, I used to think her features were not really good! Perhaps they were not, then. I have come to believe women are capable of altering their features by taking thought, even as they can indubitably alter their figures at the behest of fashion. I thought, before she looked up, that it was a beautiful face, but with something wanting in it. 'Dead perfection, no

more ! ' And then she raised her eyes and, as I say, it was as though you had switched on a light inside. Yes ! when she was animated, like that, she could capture any one.

Of course I could have sworn, when she said this about fighting, that it was all a put-up job between her and Reggie Hicks : that he had given it away to her, and she was going to ' blow the gaff ' somehow and stop it. But she didn't stop there.

' What makes them fight, I wonder ? Percy knows, I expect. He knows almost everything. Or Jonny ; perhaps he could tell us.'

Now what on earth was the girl getting at ? We all got a little embarrassed. Even old Percy got a trifle red in the face. But he could generally be trusted to keep the ball rolling somehow.

' A thousand reasons, Miss Strange. But one so powerful that for my part I wonder they ever stop fighting.'

That was Percy's flamboyantly complimentary vein all over. It made Reggie Hicks give a most unpleasant laugh, and mutter a vulgar expression under his breath. Jonny, sitting next me, stirred in his chair. I kept him quiet by putting a hand on his knee.

Miss Mooney saved the situation by giving a sigh.

' Ah ! if they would only shut up all the public-houses.'

At which Percy and I could not help laughing, though Hicks only scowled and Jonny still glowered back at him across the table.

' Oh, it was only drink you meant, after all,' said Elsie, in mock disappointment. ' How dull ! I thought for one moment you were going to say something really exciting.'

Percy bowed. ' So I was. But it's needless to insist on it now.'

' Thank God for that ! ' Reggie made his remark quite sufficiently audible. Percy would probably

have retorted if Elsie had not been sitting right between them. Jonny, next to me, said 'Shut up!' If my father had not begun to speak there might have been a row. As often happens with rather absent-minded men, a chance word impinging on his ear was apt to produce unexpected results. He must have caught the reference to drink and fighting, because he went off at score with reminiscences of old Cambridge days, when they used to have 'wines' after hall. And from that to prize-fighting—Sayers and Heenan in 1860, and Bendigo and old Ben Caunt, and the 'Tipton Slasher.' I had not heard him so full of his old Cambridge days for a long time.

'You ought to write your reminiscences, sir,' said Percy in his cheerful manner. At which young Hicks laughed again, most offensively. It occurred to me then that perhaps he was trying to goad Percy into attacking him rather than Jonny Waring. Perhaps, on reflection, he did not like the idea of fighting Jonny quite so much as he had at first.

III

We had no sooner left the dining-room than Jonny got hold of us in the passage upstairs.

'You'd better keep an eye on that fellow,' he said. 'He means to bolt.'

'Nonsense! He gave his word.' Percy had a simple faith in a promise of that sort. A man could not break an undertaking of that sort and retain his honour.

'Very likely.' Jonny motioned with his hand towards the window, drily. 'I saw him two seconds ago through the trees. He's gone to get out his machine. And I don't want to waste half the afternoon down at the Club waiting for him.'

I looked out through the next window, which gave

a better view of the back-yard. Sure enough, I saw him just wheeling his machine out of the old coach-house.

'Come on,' I called out, and went down the back-stairs as fast as I could scuttle, though I was not a very quick mover even then. Percy came clattering after me. But of course we could not catch him. I could see him, crouching down over the handle-bars of his glittering machine (it was polished steel all over, and shone in the sun so that you could see it a mile off), flash past the hedge at the foot of the garden and turn into the road to Misterton.

'Come on!' I called aloud to Percy, in all the excitement of the chase. 'We've got to fetch him back somehow.'

And we scrambled out our two bicycles at the best pace we could, and sent them down the hill outside our gate in the most reckless style. There is certainly something that gets hold of you in a man-hunt.

Yes! he had taken the Misterton turn. There he was; we could see him just flashing round the next corner as we dashed down the slope. That is the worst of having your machine polished instead of painted a sober dark green with yellow line. Ostentation never pays. On the other hand, we took that hill down from our yard gate somewhat recklessly. It wanted a touch of the brake, but we just let ourselves go for all we were worth. I don't know how we managed to get round the turn at the bottom, but I know I heard Percy shouting out as he got among the stones at the side of the road. He escaped a spill by a miracle, and so did I.

'Right behind,' he cried. 'On we go. By Jove! that was a close shave, and no mistake. Now for it! All you know along the level here.'

And we put our heads down and pursued the recreant Hicks as hard as we could pedal, shouting

out now and again as we drew closer. Reggie paid not the smallest attention, so far as I could see. But we were decidedly gaining. And I could not help feeling rather pleased that I was holding my own, and a bit more, with Percy Cudden. The fact was, I had been doing a lot of riding that winter, and was in pretty good training.

'I'm getting done,' Percy confessed, in gasps. 'Can't keep up this pace much longer. Didn't think you had it in you.'

'If you can't, he can't,' I said. 'He's in no sort of training. We'll get him at the next hill.'

And, sure enough, as we rounded the next corner we saw he had dismounted, propped his machine against a gate, and was leaning up against it, as nonchalant as you please.

'Did you want me?' he asked, sardonically. 'I had a sort of idea I heard some one calling out behind me.'

I must say Reggie Hicks was a pretty cool customer.

'I dare say you did,' said Percy. He would have liked to be bitingly sarcastic, but it's no easy matter when you are out of breath. 'We were trying to remind you—that you had an important engagement.'

'Take your time. You look as if you'd been hurrying.'

The effrontery of the fellow made me burst out.

'You're coming back with us this minute,' I said. 'When you've got the gloves on you can be as clever as you please. Jonny's waiting for you at the Club.'

He gave a sort of laugh, though it sounded rather artificial.

'What! The village champion waiting for me? The muscles of his brawny arms were strong as iron bands, eh? They were serious. They really meant it. Distressed beauty, and a duel with gloves, and all the rest of it; old Cudden taking charge, I suppose,

well on the outside of the ring. Well, it's a comic world.'

Percy flushed a little at this. But he kept to the point.

'Yes, we were serious. And you knew it. No good trying to wriggle out of it now. Are you coming back with us, or shall we have to take you?'

Hicks gave a sort of disgusted shrug of the shoulders.

'My dear Cudden, you are quite mad. How do you propose to take me, if I refuse to come? But you always were a melodramatic ass. Now, just because you are jealous of me and Elsie——'

Percy suddenly flushed crimson.

'Stop that! Are you coming back with us or not?'

He took a step forward, and Hicks flinched. He preferred to keep things on a basis of talk.

They looked at each other for a moment, Hicks with his arm half raised to guard his face. Then he wheeled his machine into the road.

'All right. I'm coming. Frankly, I'm tired of all this damned silly talk. Lead on.'

And we returned slowly, in procession, Percy leading. We rode straight through the village to Clarke's old barn, and went in. Jonny was there, walking about with his hands in his pockets, stopping now and then to look at one of the old rectory pictures that we had brought down to adorn the bare walls. He just looked up as we came in, but made no comment. Percy went to the cupboard where the gloves and other accessories were stored.

'Ready?' he said simply.

Jonny took his hands out of his pockets.

'As soon as you like.' There was a slight pause. 'I was getting a little tired of waiting.'

He seemed cool enough. I confess I did not feel any too happy myself. I had watched Jonny sparring in the evenings several times, and seen Hicks once, when he condescended to put the gloves on with our

professor. There was no getting away from the fact that Reggie had all the science there was between the two of them, though Jonny had been getting a little bit straighter lately : he no longer relied exclusively on a hard swing with the left, followed immediately by another with the right. At the same time he had no more idea of using the ring—not that we had a ring, I mean of getting out of the way—than he had of flying. He was still at the stage when he would have thought it derogatory to his dignity to duck, or retreat.

‘Here you are!’ said Percy, business-like as ever, throwing the two pairs of gloves down on the floor. ‘Sorry we have no seconds for you, but you can manage without all right, I expect. Strange and I are going to see fair play : I ’m referee, and he ’s time-keeper. You can have three-minute rounds, one minute interval. Any one got any objection?’

‘I object to the whole thing,’ said Hicks. ‘It ’s just silly, if you ask me.’

‘Well, we don’t ask you,’ said Percy crisply. ‘Your objection ’s overruled, so you may as well get on with it. I ’ll tie on your gloves. Come along.’

Cudden took command of the situation as though he had been managing such affairs all his life. I went to fasten on Jonny’s gloves, while he busied himself with Hicks. I wanted to say something to my man that might be useful, but for the life of me I could think of nothing worth saying. After all, he knew as much of boxing as I did, which was little enough : we had, both of us, had perhaps half a dozen lessons from Marsh, and I don’t know that he fancied either of us were likely to do him any very great credit. Should I tell him to go for the body? It would probably be sound advice, and it was what every second in fiction always whispered into his principal’s ear, but Jonny did not look as though he was inviting counsel of any sort. He just looked grim.

IV

'There isn't a regular ring,' said Cudden, 'so you 'll just have to do with this space here. It gives lots of room.'

He pointed to the platform on one side and a sort of zariba that he had made of chairs and tables about three paces away from it.

'You 'd better take a chair each. One at each end : that will do. Now, have you got the time ? This whistle will do for you to blow when the round 's up. Are you both ready ?'

Percy was enjoying himself, I could see.

Hicks interrupted him. 'You might tell us how long this tomfoolery 's going to last ?' he asked.

Jonny spoke for the first time for some minutes.

'It 's going on till one of us can't go on any longer,' he said uncompromisingly.

I saw a distinct look of uneasiness in the face of Reggie Hicks then, for the first time. It went almost in a flash, but it had been there.

'Well, the sooner I knock the fellow out the better, I suppose,' he said. 'Can't waste a whole afternoon playing the ass here. We shake hands, I suppose ?'

'Certainly,' said Cudden.

But Jonny would have none of it. 'I 'm not going to shake hands,' he declared, with cold finality.

Percy Cudden was hurt. 'I say, my dear chap, you must. Everybody does. I mean to say, it's always done.'

'I don't intend to.' Jonny was standing up in his corner.

'Oh, let 's get on with it !' said Hicks. 'What can you expect of the village blacksmith ? I can do without shaking hands with any of you, if it comes to that.'

He got up from his chair too.

Percy shrugged his shoulders.

'As you like. Are you ready, then?' He motioned to me, and I blew the whistle, taking out my watch and marking the time.

It was a little bit difficult at first to keep one eye on the second hand and the other on the two central figures in the ring, and I didn't see the first round very clearly. Jonny came forward with his two hands quite low, hanging loosely by his side, and I could see at once that he meant to swing as soon as he got a chance. Hicks could see it as well, though, and he knew how to deal with swings all right. He was clearly a lot the quicker, and he got in twice with his left, on the nose and jaw, without Jonny landing anywhere. But neither of them did much damage during that first round. It seemed interminable to me, and I suspect it felt even worse to them. Three-minute rounds are too long, really, for any one not in good fighting trim. Cudden said afterwards that he thought the longer time would be in Jonny's favour. I dare say it was, in the end. He was certainly in better training than Hicks.

However, the three minutes went at last: I blew the whistle, and the two went to their corners and sat down. Jonny went reluctantly. He had failed to get anything like a solid blow in at all, and he showed one or two marks on the face, but he seemed perfectly fresh. Hicks looked quite undamaged, but was breathing rather quickly.

And the second round went very much the same. Jonny tried hard to get in to close quarters, but the other kept him out all the time, and landed two or three nasty upper-cuts as he tried to come in with his head down. I always told Jonny that habit of his was fatal—trying to rush his man with his head down, like a bull. He got decidedly shaken the third time

he tried in this round, and it was about all he could do to keep going till the whistle went. I am not sure, in the excitement of the moment, that I may not have blown a second or two before it was time.

All this time Reggie Hicks was letting him beat himself. He allowed him to do all the leading, and was content to prop him off with his left when he tried to come in, guarding himself from the swings, and putting in an occasional upper-cut when opportunity offered. I confess I fidgeted on my chair as I watched them. The only thing that reassured me at all was Jonny's expression. He did not look like being beaten, and he kept quite remarkably cool.

And then, suddenly, he managed to get home. I was not looking at the moment, or rather I happened to be looking at my watch to see how much time there was to go, and so I missed seeing exactly what happened. But somehow or other it was clear that he had managed to get through Hicks' guard. I could tell that by a sudden outburst of violent language. And, looking up from my watch, I saw Hicks dashing in at his opponent, his arms going like flails, in very different style from anything he had yet shown. Clearly he had been hurt, and wanted to get even quick.

This was exactly what Jonny wanted. He had not been able to touch the other as long as he kept his head and did not let himself get careless. Hicks might have gone on all day keeping him at a distance with a straight left, and letting him exhaust himself by trying to get over or through his guard. I don't see how Jonny could ever have touched him. But this was a different matter. Here was a fellow coming at him like a bull at a gate, only anxious to catch him with a swing somewhere on the head and send him to the floor. This was the sort of attack he could deal with. And he guarded a wild right swing with his left glove easily enough, getting in a straight punch

with his own right in the neighbourhood of the solar plexus.

Hicks collapsed on the floor like a pricked balloon. All the fight seemed to have gone out of him with the escaping air. He lay there, groaning, and made no attempt to rise.

Cudden began counting the seconds slowly.

Jonny stood waiting, his face grimmer than ever.

'Never mind about that,' he said suddenly. And then to the recumbent Hicks, 'Get up, you swine!'

Hicks made no reply but a moan. Cudden finished counting solemnly.

'— Nine, ten! He's out,' he said.

'He's nothing of the sort,' Jonny said. 'He's shamming, and he's got to get up and go on with it.'

Poor Percy Cudden! Things would not go right that day: his most sacred traditions were flouted at every turn.

'My dear chap,' he said, 'he's taken the count.'

Jonny paid no more attention to him.

'Are you going to get up and go on or not?' he asked severely.

'How the devil can I?' Hicks spoke from the floor. 'You caught me in the wind, or I'd have been up long ago. I suppose you've won.'

'If you don't get up and go on I'll kick you up,' Jonny proceeded, calmly ignoring his remark.

Percy Cudden began protesting. 'My dear man, he's given in. You can't do that sort of thing, you know.'

But Jonny took no notice whatsoever. He was fumbling with his gloves. At last he got one off. He went to the cupboard where we kept most of our properties and pulled out a singlestick. We had not done much in the way of singlestick fighting yet, but Cudden was all for trying everything that was not too expensive.

'I say. Steady on!' he said, warningly.

Jonny was perfectly cool, but very determined.

'You say the fight's over,' he explained. 'Very well, then your job's over too. All I say is that I'm going to give him a sound thrashing.'

And without any further talk he began laying into young Hicks pretty hard. I don't think Hicks wanted to get up at all, but it was too painful to take lying down. He scrambled to his feet. And then Jonny got hold of him with one hand and went on thrashing him methodically with the other. In a way it was quite comic. And the way Hicks yelped reminded me of a puppy being chastised by a keeper. He made a tremendous row.

Percy tried to interfere, but I kept him off.

'Serve him right,' I said. 'He could have gone on fighting all right if he'd wanted.'

'He'll bring in some one if he makes that infernal row,' said Cudden, uneasily. And he had hardly spoken before the door opened, and my father appeared.

V

I believe that was the first time in my life that I had ever seen my father really angry. Sometimes, very rarely, he may have been a little irritable—with Miss Mooney, for example, or even with myself. But this time his voice rang out with a tone that sent a chill through me. It made even Percy Cudden jump.

'What are you boys doing?' he said.

And for a moment there was a dead silence, all the more noticeable for the row that had been going on a moment before. Jonny dropped his weapon on the floor, and let go of his victim's collar. Hicks stopped squealing and looked for the moment rather ashamed of himself. Cudden and I stood stock-still.

'What is the meaning of this disgraceful noise?' the

Canon went on. I could see his whole body trembling as he stood there, leaning on his stick. And not one of us could utter a word. It was so unexpected and portentous a sight—the Canon with a face almost colourless, and a voice that shook.

He pointed to Jonny.

‘Waring, you had better go to your room, and stay there till I send for you. Cudden, I shall ask you for an explanation afterwards. Go up to the rectory now, all of you.’

He stood there, while we all filed out before him, sheepishly enough. Not one of us said a word until we got out of hearing. Then Percy, who had been cogitating deeply, opened his mouth.

‘I suppose I’d better say there was a bit of an argument,’ he said, his brows corrugated with hard thought. ‘Though I don’t know what the deuce I can say about that infernal singlestick.’

‘Say he wanted a thrashing, and I was doing my best to give it him,’ put in Jonny, who was still quite unrepentant.

‘It would have been all right if he hadn’t made such a row over it. I never heard such a squealing. Might have been a pig being killed.’

Percy looked over his shoulder at Hicks, who was following some little way behind.

‘Or equally all right if he hadn’t refused to go on,’ I urged.

Percy shrugged his shoulders. ‘What’s the good of saying that? He’ll have his own version, I suppose. I don’t want anything to come out, of course, about——’

He didn’t finish the sentence, and his face reddened. Percy Cudden was chivalry personified.

‘I don’t see that he’s likely to mention Elsie’s name,’ I said.

Jonny thrust his hands deeply into his pockets, walking on with his head down.

‘He’d better not,’ he muttered to himself.

That was a remarkably uncomfortable afternoon. We three went and sat up in Jonny’s room together, to discuss things. But it seemed impossible to settle upon any line of action. Of course it was not Jonny’s fault any more than ours, and we were united in our determination to take our fair share of the blame. Jonny, on the other hand, was even more determined to hold to it that we had nothing whatever to do with the final episode.

‘If the Canon asks me,’ he said, ‘I shall tell him just exactly what happened. We were having a fight with gloves, say, over something he said about us. And when he wouldn’t go on I was trying to make him.’

‘The main fact is,’ Cudden interrupted, ‘that the fellow is absolutely impossible. We must try to get that in somehow. Out of evil, good. If we could only get Hicks politely asked to go home and mind his own business——’

‘What is his business?’ I asked.

‘Learning to be a baronet,’ said Jonny, with contempt.

‘Well, if the Canon asks me, I shall tell him exactly what I think about the beast.’ Cudden’s sanguine spirit was beginning to rise again. ‘I mean to say, he has ruined this place. Has it ever been the same, or anything like it, since he came?’

It certainly had not. But I felt, somewhere deep within me, that it never could be the same again now. After all, we were younger then, when there were only three of us, and our eyes had not been opened.

‘Anyway,’ I said, ‘I suppose we shall be going up to Cambridge this year.’

We sat up there and discussed these topics until it was nearly tea-time. And then, just about four o’clock, when we were beginning to wonder what was going to happen next, and when one of us would

receive a summons to the study, there came a message for me.

‘Mr. Rudolf is wanted down at the Club, please.’

The maid did not know who it was, but one of the young men who belonged had sent a message up. They wanted me down there at once.

‘It’s probably you they want.’ I turned to Percy. He was the figure to whom they all turned naturally. I could not understand them wanting me. And I was not sure that I ought to go. We were all under arrest, so to speak.

‘I expect the Canon sent for you,’ said Percy. ‘You’d better go. He probably wants to find out what you think. I expect he’s all right by now.’

I confess I did not like going in the least. However, it seemed that I had a chance of saying something on Jonny’s behalf, and perhaps on Cudden’s. Not that Percy was likely to come to serious harm, whatever happened. Besides, it was probably true enough, as he had suggested, that the storm had passed over by now.

But I went down the village street rather slowly, wondering what I should say when I got there. And as I turned the corner, I was aware of a crowd round the old barn.

What could be the matter? Perhaps they had lost the key and sent for me to see if I could let them in. Perhaps my father had gone away and taken the key with him, accidentally. They were all very silent, I thought. And then I saw old Harrison, Nicholas Harrison, who farmed most of the glebe, detach himself from the others and come towards me, looking very serious. I knew by that time that something must have happened.

‘I sent one of the lads up for you, Mister Rudolf. Thought as you might like to see him, though there ain’t nothink to be done.’

It was the first time old Harrison had ever addressed me with so much respect. Usually he was much more offhand in his manner.

He went in with me, taking off his hat as he entered the door. The old barn was empty, except for a figure sitting back in an upright chair, the head leaning, just a trifle on one side, against the high back. It was my father, and he was quite dead. He must have gone almost immediately after we left.

The Strange Family

Book II



I

I SUPPOSE it is necessary to give some sketch of the time that elapsed before everything was cleared up : before we had definitely turned out of the old rectory, and made way for a new incumbent, with Elsie and Miss Mooney (taking with them a sufficiency of the old furniture) settled temporarily in the thatched cottage just the other side of the church, which we had taken and had put into good order, and I myself, at last, an undergraduate of St. Michael's College, generally known as 'Mike's,' but with no definite home at all, so far as I could see. Somehow or other, I was never able to regard the cottage at Ashe, with its tiny little garden overlooked by the back windows of Mr. Nicholas Harrison's imposing red brick residence, as my home. I was never in favour of those two staying in the village at all : it seemed a mistake to me, after being in a position of importance, to take up voluntarily a position in which you were nobody at all. But they were both against me. And it made things easier for the moment, in the matter of moving.

It is all a long while ago now, and memory has a trick of dropping the connecting links here and there, so that it is rather as a series of isolated pictures that I remember those few months in which we were getting ready to leave the old house in which we had been born. I remember, first of all, going into the Club for the second time that afternoon, with old Nicholas Harrison by my side, and seeing my father sitting in

a chair in the dim light, so naturally and yet with something in the pose that told me at once that he was dead. It was the first time I had ever seen a dead man. Instinctively I felt that repugnance with which all live animals regard a corpse. If I had not held myself in close constraint, I should have shied away from it like a young colt. But the churchwarden was with me. I went up and looked at it with an inward shiver, ashamed of myself all the time. Why on earth should we feel this horror of death? We all have to pass through that door, in due course. There can be nothing very terrible in a fate that is the common lot of man. And, except that the eyes were not quite closed, there was nothing repellent in the sight. He looked as though he might have just fallen asleep. The head was a little on one side: the hands lightly clasped.

Nicholas Harrison was saying something. I pulled myself together to listen.

'Better get 'im up to the house,' he was saying. 'Don't want 'im to get all stiff, like.'

I assented, and he went to the door. I heard mutterings in the distance.

Yes! I was now the Head of the House, and responsible as such, all of a sudden, for issuing orders and seeing generally that the right things were done. And what did I know about anything? I felt the merest child, standing there, without experience, without knowledge, at the mercy of the nearest person with a plausible tongue. What should I have to do now? Well, the first thing was to get back to the rectory. One could at any rate talk things over there.

And in a few minutes we were walking slowly up the village street, behind four men carrying the body on an improvised stretcher. It seemed to me an interminable walk, and all the time a whole flock of wild

and unbidden thoughts rushed through my mind. I could almost hear the sound of their wings as they flew : it reminded me of a myriad starlings beginning their aerial evolutions before migration.

What would Miss Mooney do now, and Elsie ? They were the two important items in my budget. For behind everything this question of money was always recurring. We should have to find a new home somewhere. And would he have left enough for our expenses at Cambridge ? He must have made arrangements for that : it had been in his mind so long. I could still hear Miss Mooney protesting a hundred times against some little extravagance. ' Oh, Canon, do you really think we ought ? Can we really afford it, with all these calls on you.'

It gave me a feeling of sudden shame to find myself thinking of money at that moment. They were carrying the body carefully in front, but every now and then it slipped a little to one side, and the procession had to halt while they adjusted matters. They had covered his face with the old Inverness cape he wore when he walked about the village at that time of the year. I remember wishing they had covered his boots too : they looked so stiff and unnatural sticking up straight in the air.

And what a shocking pair of old boots they were, thus exposed ! It was on things of that kind that he must have been saving, for our benefit. I confess that was the first thing that really affected me as we walked up past the churchyard. I had not realised it before, but suddenly my eyes filled and something rose in my throat and made me choke. I made a tremendous effort, and walked on without a sign. I had the family on my shoulders now : I was the Head of the House, and no longer a shy boy without experience of affairs. But would we never reach the house ?

II

Nicholas Harrison, I suppose, had sent some one on to warn them at the rectory of what had happened. At any rate, I had never thought of doing so, and I was just wondering whether I ought not to have sent a messenger forward. But as we came slowly and silently past the church and up the long sweep of the carriage drive towards the front door I noticed that it was opening slowly, as though of its own volition, to receive us. And when we (or rather the bearers) shuffled up the broad stone steps and passed inside to the hall there was Ellen Saunders, our new housemaid, standing by the gong on one side, her handkerchief to her eyes, and Jane Mason, the cook, on the other, shaken with sobs, with an even larger handkerchief. And behind them both, in the semi-darkness of the interior (for they had already pulled down the blinds of the window at the far end), a dim shape that looked like some gigantic bird flapping its wings. Which was, of course, Miss Mooney.

Elsie was nowhere to be seen.

I was conscious of watching the whole performance as though it were something unreal—a mere scene on the stage—in which my own self was taking no actual part. The hushed voices, the funereal movement, the parade of grief and awe became so oppressive that I felt myself becoming infected together with the rest. I could not raise my voice above a whisper, because all the rest were whispering, and yet I wanted to shout. It was as though we were all under a spell. Anything to break through the unnatural obstruction! Death—what was it after all, that one should treat its appearance with this exaggerated deference? Had we not been talking it over and setting it in its proper place, so to speak, any time this last year or so? Did

it not come to all, in due course? With every breath we drew some human being, in some part of this planet of ours, passed out of the body.

He had passed. A few minutes ago, and that body, now lying so stiff and stark under the Inverness cape, was alive. What precisely did that mean? What was the difference between that state and this? How does a body differ from the clothing? You might say his coat was alive an hour or so before, or even those poor, worn-out boots. Then they moved and obeyed the will: now they were inert and motionless. They looked already, like the body, as though something had departed from them. But so they did when he took them off for the night and put them on the floor by his bedside. This death that we made so terrible, did it only affect externals?

I wanted to say something of all this as I mounted the stairs behind those four bearers. But of course I could not. They would not understand—nor would Mooney; she would merely think I had gone mad, or else was showing myself most reprehensibly lacking in proper feeling. All the time I was conscious that she was watching me as though she were half afraid I might be tempted to do or say something indecorous. (No doubt she was merely wondering whether I had sense enough to take over the management of everything, or whether I should be content to leave everything in her hands.) Perhaps she was not quite sure which alternative would be the more desirable.

She turned to me, when we had placed the body on the bed upstairs, and the last hobnailed boot had clattered out over the tiles in the hall, with a half-apologetic air.

‘I wonder,’ she said. ‘Dear, dear! Ought we to send for a doctor? Fortunately he called on Dr. Macaulay only last week.’

‘Fortunately? Why?’

She dropped her voice to a pitch that was barely audible.

‘My poor boy! Of course you don’t know about these things. But there might have to be—an inquest.’

I seized the opportunity.

‘I’ll ride over at once and see old Macaulay,’ I said carelessly. ‘I suppose he’d better know about it.’ It would be something to do. And how I longed to get out of that house and away into the open air.

Miss Mooney was a born temporiser. No sooner did any one suggest a course of action than she immediately began to raise objections.

‘Do you think you ought?’ she asked anxiously. ‘I’m sure Jonny would go if you asked him, or Percy Cudden. It’s such a long way—and it’s almost dark now.’

‘It’s my business to go, and I’m going,’ I said with finality. And Miss Mooney, as I noticed with gratification, accepted my decision meekly.

‘Well,’ she admitted, ‘I think Dr. Macaulay ought to be told at once. He will know what to do.’

But I was already going out to get my machine ready. I did not even go upstairs to tell either of the others: in fact I was half afraid one of them might want to come with me, and just then I wanted to be alone for a while. Instinct told me that I should be better by myself. And in fact, as soon as I turned on to the Misterton road I was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of passionate grief. I caught my breath in a violent sob, and in another moment I was off my machine, and leaning up against a gate by the roadside, with the tears running down my face.

Death might be the common lot, but what I wanted then was to see him once more, and explain it all. It hurt more than anything that he should have left us

like that, in the middle of a misunderstanding. The first time in my life that I had ever seen him show a hint of anger with me—or indeed with any of us !

And it was all owing to that infernal fellow Hicks. Only a few hours ago we, Percy and I, had been chasing him along that very road. There was the gate where he had awaited us. It was the same road : I was on the same machine ; but I was no longer the same person. Three short hours had made all that immense difference between my old self and the new. And it would never be the same again. I felt, as I looked over the fields towards Misterton, that I was beginning a new epoch of my life. Up to that time I had been sheltered in a hundred ways : now I had to look after myself—and others as well. I must shoulder responsibilities. The old careless time was gone for ever, and we could never recapture it, even if we stopped by the way to try. And that was Life. We had to take these things as they came, and make the best of them.

He probably knew all about it now.

‘ I don’t see what else we could have done,’ I said aloud, as I leaned on that gate. ‘ It wasn’t just a row about nothing. But I expect you understand all right.’

And, curiously enough, it made me feel a lot better just saying those few words. I got on the bicycle again (after lighting up the swinging hub lamp enclosed in the big front wheel, not without difficulty) and rode slowly along the ruts towards Misterton and Dr. Macaulay, reflecting as I went. For one thing, Hicks would want to go at once, and we certainly would not try to detain him. Jonny, of course, would stay till we went up for our scholarship together : whatever happened, he and I would hold together. And dear old Percy Cudden could probably be persuaded to remain, at all events for a time. It would be much easier with those two to help me, at first.

III

Hicks went away early the next morning, and it was some time before we met again. Percy Cudden stayed until the funeral was over, and then he too went—not without regrets. His family had decided that, after all, he should go into the business at once. Universities were not for Percy; and perhaps Cambridge might have been too much for him; but I have sometimes wondered. He might have been a great man at the Footlights, even if the A.D.C. had refused his invaluable assistance. But Percy's dreams, and many of mine as well, ended that morning on our front doorstep when we helped to pack him and his belongings into the magnificent carriage and pair sent over from the family residence at Fleckney.

The four of us were left alone together, for the first time. There we were, the same quartette, in the same place, but it was all different: the centre of our system had fallen out, and there was nothing left to hold us together. There was a sense of unreality about everything. It was all very well for Miss Mooney to come into the study after the funeral and hand over to me my father's watch and chain, with the key of his private drawer, where he kept all his important possessions and documents—the only drawer in the study table that was always kept locked. It was as though she handed me a charm—something that might be expected to work miracles. I believe she would have liked to put the things into a glass case and pray to them.

I opened the drawer in the table, of course. But I did not altogether like doing it. I felt as though I were intruding on his private affairs. However, I had to keep the wheels of the household going, and in that drawer was the key of the metal cash-box that

he always kept behind the row of Milner's *Church History* and Horne's *Introduction to the Scriptures*. I suppose he felt it improbable that any burglar would disturb those dusty volumes on their shelf. And then I had to look through the contents of the drawer for important documents.

I did not find anything of immediate importance. His papers, I discovered afterwards, were mostly with our family solicitor, old Mr. Miles of Fleckney. But I found one or two things that detained me. A few rings and an old brooch, of no apparent value, that had probably belonged to my mother. A stray volume of a diary (he had always kept one, rather for noting down engagements than for anything else) attracted my attention, and I looked through the pages with a momentary curiosity. It was dated rather more than twenty years before—shortly after he had married—and the book opened by chance at a page in the month of June. There was his handwriting, almost the same as it had been a few hours ago, and he had noted down an engagement for the Monday at the top of the page.

Ruridecanal Conference at Winscombe's. Dine and sleep.

That was all—except that another hand had added underneath—

And left me all alone.—M.

That must have been my mother—the mother whom I had never known, whose miniature hung in the drawing-room on the right hand of the big mirror over the mantelpiece.

Twenty years ago they too had been young, comparatively speaking. She, at any rate. And they had known Love, and decided that they could not live apart, and had married, and had but three or four years together, all told. What had happened now? Were they joined together again, as some would assert,

or was that merely a pretence, invented to comfort ourselves? There were many who held that death ended all, that beyond the gate lay—nothing: that we should never more feel or think or love. Was all this marvellous apparatus of ours devised for no greater end than this—that our bodies should decay and rise again in new forms of vegetation? Was there not something immortal in even the worst of us? Obscured, perhaps, because we had paid too much attention to other things—to the things of this world. We only perceived the material side. But in that fifteenth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, to which we had listened at the funeral service, did not St. Paul say ‘There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body,’ and so forth? including, I admit, a great deal that seemed to me merely vague thoughts clothed in grand language. But that seemed to me the main point he was making. This our corruptible body died and perished: the incorruptible could not die: the spirit remained.

Yes, I was prepared to believe that. It seemed logical—even necessary. Of course it might be mere conceit on my part, but I could not find it in me to believe that the Personality passed away, vanished, was lost. That would make the world merely a callous joke on the part of the Creator.

IV

Jonny Waring and I sat up and talked over these subjects sometimes when the other two had gone to bed. Perhaps it was really Jonny more than myself who put forward the ideas I have set down here. He had always led the way, for my development took time. Without him I often wonder now whether I should have been content to accept blindly all that I was taught. The lazy and the timorous, after all, do take

the easier course. It was a temptation to follow blindly in the road my father had trod. I believed in his intellect : I loved his character : I had a natural tendency to believe what I was authoritatively told. But there was so much in the tenets of the Christian religion, as taught in those days, that the very laziest, the most timorous, could hardly bring themselves to swallow.

‘ You could never get him to talk about it,’ said Jonny, meaning, of course, the Canon. ‘ He took as much as he wanted and left the rest. I don’t suppose he believed all these dogmas, as they call them. But he wouldn’t discuss the subject.’

‘ I think Percy tried to get something out of him once or twice,’ I said.

‘ If Percy couldn’t manage it, no one could.’

We sat silent a few minutes, recalling some of Cudden’s remarkable feats.

‘ I wish he was here now,’ I said. ‘ A fellow like Percy does an awful lot of good in the world. He helps things along : he breeds a spirit of cheerfulness. I should think he’s pretty useful with a lot of factory hands, such as they’ve got in that Fleckney factory.’

Jonny was musing. ‘ Some people do help the world along, merely by being alive. Some, like that fellow Hicks, hold it back. There are men who put oil in the works, and others who seem to spend all their time chucking in handfuls of sand.’

I sighed. ‘ I wish he was coming up to Cambridge with us.’ Percy Cudden, of course, I meant.

Jonny said nothing.

‘ Don’t you wish he was coming up too ? ’ I insisted, a little surprised at his silence.

He fidgeted in his chair, and reddened.

‘ I think,’ he began, and paused. ‘ Look here, I’ll have to tell you some time. I’ve made up my mind it’s no good. What’s the use of a fellow like me

going up to these universities of yours? I should be like a fish out of water. I'm going back to Coventry—to the works.'

I looked up at him in blank astonishment. For a moment I could not find my voice. This unexpected blow seemed to shatter the whole fabric of my carefully planned future.

'Why!' I broke out at last. 'But you must come. It's all arranged—has been arranged for years. You know it has. Aren't you coming up for a scholarship with me next month?'

He shook his head. 'I shouldn't get one if I did. I'm not really good enough. I went to ask Rudd, at Willoughby. He was a wrangler, and he didn't think I could do it.'

'You know perfectly well what Father thought about it. Besides, he meant us to go up together anyway. You can't back out of it now like this. What would he think—after saving up for that one purpose? And what on earth do you suppose I shall do there without you?'

And really I could not visualise myself at Mike's alone. I should be terribly frightened, going up all by myself. You must bear in mind that I had never been thrown on my own resources in the least. If I had only been to school it would have been another matter. I had been relying on Jonny in my mind all these years. Going together would make it absolutely different—just sufficiently new and strange to be exciting, but with a feeling of security in the background. That was what I had been building on ever since the scheme had been first proposed. It seemed to me that my world lay in ruins.

But Jonny was obstinate. He always had been an obstinate fellow. I knew from the first it was quite hopeless. Never had I been able to persuade him to change his mind over a point of action on which he

had once decided. But I went on arguing. This was everything to me.

'I can't do it,' he broke in upon my harangue at last. 'I'm sorry, old man. I knew you wouldn't like it. But I made up my mind last night. The Canon did too much for me as it was. And if it hadn't been for me losing my temper with that Hicks he might have been alive still.'

'What utter nonsense!'

'Maybe. Maybe not.' He spoke quietly, in a low voice.

'You know it is. It was Hicks who did it, if any one. Making all that row, like a pig being killed.'

He smiled grimly. 'Ay, there might have been a pig the less if the Canon hadn't come down the road just then. And instead of that, there's a good man gone.'

He ended with a sigh.

'He would think you'd failed me if he knew,' I put in as a final shot. 'He knew I'd never be able to manage there all by myself.' I may have felt a touch of shame advancing this argument, but I would have tried anything to break his resolution.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Time you learned to stand on your own feet,' he said, with a sort of twisted smile. 'I'm doing what I think is best for you. For all of you,' he added as an afterthought.

I saw in a flash.

'Mooney's been talking to you,' I said.

v

And of course she had. I might have known it, for I had seen him coming out of the old schoolroom the afternoon before. He wouldn't say any more, but he didn't deny it. And I tackled Miss Mooney

myself the next morning, and got her down pretty close to confessing everything, though she was always a slippery customer.

'Jonny told me yesterday that he had decided not to come up to Cambridge,' I said. Miss Mooney, like a ship in full sail, had come into the study for some reason or other. She bore with her an odour as of spices and preserved fruits, like some argosy from the East. This was because she had been in the store-room, no doubt, serving out things to the cook. The large bunch of keys, which she carried with her in the morning, jingled in her hand.

'Oh, has he told you? Yes, my dear. So sensible of him, I think. So much better for him to begin and earn a living for himself early. Don't you think so?'

'Look here, Miss Mooney, what did you say to him to make him change his mind?'

But Miss Mooney disregarded the implication altogether. She went straight on, pursuing her own thoughts.

'I was really rather touched at the way he put it,' she went on. 'He quite saw how different things were now since—since the death of the poor Canon. I will say of the Warings, they were always a grateful family. Not like some of the others, who take everything you give them as though it was theirs by right. Like Sarah Batt, and all that Jesson family. Only the other day I took old Mrs. Jesson some of that jelly——'

It seemed to me that Miss Mooney was beginning to wander a little from the point. I recalled her firmly.

'How do you mean about things being so different now?' I asked. 'You know Father meant us to go up together. Do you think he would like to see all his plans wasted?'

'Ah, but things are different, my dear boy. You know they must be altogether different now. You see, while the dear Canon lived, there were the pupils. And the living, though of course that was never very much. And the rectory to live in. Now, I'm sure I don't know how we shall manage. You see, there will be you at Cambridge, and Elsie——'

'I suppose you put all this before Jonny,' I interrupted. 'Particularly Elsie.'

I dare say I spoke rather bitterly. I knew the least mention of financial difficulty would be enough, but if Elsie's name once came up it would be all over.

'My dear boy,' Mooney expostulated, and was off again at large on the subject of Money in General, and the way prices kept going up. Paying forty pounds a year for that house was ridiculous: it was really no more than a cottage, or at most a couple of cottages turned into one. You see, it wasn't as though the dear Canon had left a fortune behind him. Careful as he had always been (and she contrived to insert here one or two little stories of his economical habits), it was really as much as he could do to get along, after putting by a certain sum of money every year for my education.

'You mean for our education,' I put in again.

But Mooney evaded the point, as usual. She had such a flow of language that it was impossible to tie her down to anything definite. And Jonny himself, she pointed out, knew best what he wanted. University education was all right for me, but seriously, was it likely to be any real use to him? So many of the neighbourhood had thought as she did on the matter—what a mistake it was liable to be if you once took people out of their proper station. It was not really good for them: it did them no real benefit in the end. Jonny had the sense to see this, and she thought all the better of him for it. He had shown

her a letter from the Coventry people. They were opening a new branch at Leicester, and offered him a post there. So wise of him to take the chance when it offered. A bird in the hand.

Thus dear old Miss Mooney, at immense length. Since the Canon's death, I think her flow of words had increased by fifty per cent. And she worked most of them off on me, when Elsie was out of the way, because there was now no one else, except the servants.

I tackled Elsie later. But Elsie was even more difficult. For one thing, she was much cleverer.

'If you ask me,' she said, 'I don't see what else he could have done. Jonny Waring, after all, may be allowed to have a little proper pride. I don't suppose he wants to go on sponging on you for ever.'

'It isn't a question of sponging,' I retorted, with some heat. 'It's just a question of carrying out father's wishes as well as we can. You know he had set his heart on this.'

She gave a slight gesture of the hands.

'Do I? As a matter of fact I know nothing of the kind. I believe he once thought Jonny would make a great mathematician, or whatever you call them. Jonny himself says he doesn't think he will. Jonny ought to know as well as any one. And even if he went up to Cambridge and became one, would it make him any happier?'

'If he took a good degree he might become anything.'

'I suppose he might teach other people. And suppose he taught them? He might become a fellow of his college, or whatever they call it. Is that anything so very exciting? Personally, I would rather be a man than a mathematician.'

'One might be both, possibly. It's hopeless now, I see—but I do wish old Mooney had kept herself to

herself. If she hadn't begun to open her heart to him about money matters, he would never have gone off at a tangent like that. I know he was looking forward to it as much as I was.'

'I think Mooney was perfectly right to tell him. Things are different now, and you know they are. Do you want me to live down in this out-of-the-world place on two hundred a year for the rest of my life?'

I had been talking over the financial part of the business with Miles, our solicitor, and knew pretty well what was left by this time. There ought to be eight hundred a year between the two of us, or nearly. According to the will, it was to be divided equally. There was no mention in the document of the sum he had saved up for our Cambridge expenses, but certain notes in his recent diaries made it clear what he intended to do with the amount that had come from the pupils during the last few years. The figures he had jotted down came to something like a thousand pounds.

I told Elsie this, and asked her point-blank how much she wanted. Surely she ought to be able to manage on four hundred. She looked at me in that provoking way she had, as though I were a creature of inferior intellect whom it was hardly worth while to try and conciliate.

'Manage? Oh, I dare say one could manage, in a fashion. That is hardly the point. You are very young in some ways, you know. Not having been to school, perhaps. Generosity is all very well—up to a point.'

'Up to the point when it begins to touch your own pocket,' I suggested, rather bitterly.

She laughed. Elsie never cared in the least for shafts of that kind. 'My dear Rudolf, I admit frankly I'm out for all I can get. Why not? I've not had a very interesting time, so far, but it's wonderful what a difference a few hundred pounds may make, properly ex-

pended. Oh, I'm quite aware it doesn't sound pretty, put in that bald way. But I do not see why Jonny Waring, nice boy as he is, should run off with five or six hundred pounds of our small fortune. Mooney and I have talked it over several times.'

'I've not the least doubt of it,' I said drily. 'And I've no doubt you knew perfectly well what Jonny would do as soon as Mooney put it before him like that. He'd sooner cut off a hand than take a penny that might possibly go to you.'

You could see Elsie's face light up as I said that. Curious, that trick of hers when she suddenly became interested or excited. It reminded me of one of those lamp-shades with faces painted on them, and the difference in the look of them before the flame was turned up and after. The features were the same, but the one was dull and flat, the other all animation and delicate colour. But this time the light only lasted a few seconds.

'Do you really think so?' she said, quite eagerly. And then she fell silent, thinking, and the colour seemed to ebb and fade away.

'You know it as well as I do,' I said. 'You know he has always worshipped you, from the first day he came here.'

She gave a little laugh.

'How angry you are!' she said. 'Don't you like them to admire me?' And she minced up and down the room for a minute, with a sort of affected simper that was yet extraordinarily taking. It brought back the days of the theatricals in the old barn, and Percy Cudden, and the rest of it. Especially Percy. How he would have played up to her then, if he had been there!

'I wish old Percy hadn't gone.' The words came involuntarily.

'Dear Percy,' she mocked, and then became pensive.

‘Poor dear Percy! I suppose he was another of them. If he had only been—a little more of a gentleman.’

‘Like Reggie Hicks, I suppose,’ I put in.

She sighed. ‘Yes! And Reggie too. It did make it all rather difficult, you know. And you were all such children, and thought yourselves so big and grown-up.’

‘Percy Cudden happens to be just seven months junior to you. Not so very much, after all.’

She gave a little shrug of the shoulders. ‘My good brother, I’m a woman of twenty, and he’s a boy of nineteen. That’s all the difference. But it means a lot—as you’ll find out some day.’

‘Now you can go and patronise Mooney, and I’ll try and get on with my work,’ I said, putting my pen firmly into the ink-pot. She went, singing. But I did not manage to get through much work that morning. I was wondering what would happen to that sister of mine. What would she do down here, all alone with Mooney in that cottage down by Nicholas Harrison’s? It certainly was not an exciting prospect. To go on helping in the parish—if the new parson wanted her assistance: to play the organ in church on Sundays, perhaps, and help Miss Mooney with the choir: to get a little pony-cart and drive round in the summer to an occasional garden party in the neighbourhood. And probably, in the end, to marry some clergyman—or a squire who thought of nothing but hunting. Yes, women sometimes had a pretty thin time of it, by comparison with ourselves. One had to make allowances for them.

VI

I went up to try for my scholarship that summer—and failed. I am almost ashamed to say that my failure was due (so I gathered later) entirely to my own weakness, or nervousness, or whatever you like

to call it. Looking back, I perceive now that I must have been extraordinarily timid in those days. Probably I have some touches of it left now. But my failure in the examination dated from the moment when some other candidate let out the fact that, as scholars, we should have to read the lessons in chapel. The ancient foundation of St. Michael's had an exceptionally fine chapel, and the thought of having to advance to that reading-desk and go through the lessons of the day before an assembled congregation was too much for my nerves. I was thinking about it all the time that I ought to have been hammering out my Greek iambics ; and in consequence I failed at what was really my strongest point.

I went up to Mike's that September, none the less. I remember the shyness that overwhelmed me for the first few days. If it had not been for a certain pride, I believe I should have turned tail when I arrived at the college gates and gone straight back to Ashe. However, with the aid of the under-porter I struggled through those first few hours. He told me what I had to do, and what it was advisable for me to get ; and took me round to my staircase, where the name of STRANGE was already displayed on the porch, in the midst of some half-dozen other patronymics ; and introduced me there to an elderly and buxom lady, called Mrs. Perrott, who looked after all the young men on that block in a spirit of friendly condescension. He left me, with my luggage, in the middle of a rather bare room, with a sadly worn carpet. One or two wooden boxes, containing a few pictures and books from Ashe, already awaited my attention. I had packed up a dozen bottles of wine, I remember, in one box, and was reminded of the fact by a thin stream of red that had meandered slowly across part of the dingy carpet. Obviously I had not made a success of that packing.

Still, there was something about that room, up three flights of stairs in staircase Q, New Court. It was my castle, in which I was to prepare for the great campaign of life, to which I could retreat after each initial skirmish and refresh myself for another attempt. Shutting the outside door—'sporting the oak'—I could be secure from interruption, more or less. (At any rate, I thought so then: subsequently I discovered that a sported oak was not inviolable by a determined attack.) And it was something to find any one so friendly and helpful, in her slightly condescending manner, as the invaluable Mrs. Perrott. She had the reputation, thoroughly deserved, I am sure, of being the best bedmaker in Mike's. She was certainly the most presentable. Bedmakers, as a rule, were frowsy creatures in those far-off days, but Mrs. Perrott had an air about her. She looked like a superior housekeeper, dressed for a visit to the seaside. She was an ornament to the court. And for the other poor creatures who hung about the place, professing to belong to her own exalted craft, she had an amused contempt. In the cause of discipline and good behaviour generally, I am sure she was of far more value than many deans. There was very little rowdiness on her staircase. She liked her young gentlemen to be gentlemen, as she took occasion to say at intervals. Perhaps she also liked them to treat her with a certain deference. I did not fail in this respect. We got on together admirably from the first.

Yes, I think Mrs. Perrott may take the chief credit for smoothing my entrance into college life. She instructed me when and how I should go and report myself to the Senior Tutor, and fortified me when I returned with a cup of strong tea: told me where I should go in the town, and what I ought to buy for immediate use: how to order my meals from the kitchen: when and in what costume I should attend

chapel and hall. I hope I showed myself properly grateful for all her kindness. I remember, when hall was over, drawing up the one armchair to the fire, for it was rather a chilly night, and lighting my first Cambridge pipe with the feeling that I had not made too bad a start in my career. The opening obstacles had been surmounted without disaster: perhaps the new life might prove something not too terrible, possibly even rather agreeable. I was always inclined to believe that, fundamentally, my fellow-creatures were a pleasant and good-natured breed.

*Chapter II**On Trial*

I

JONNY WARING took up his post at the Leicester works about a week before I went up to try for my scholarship—which I so shamefully failed to get. (I have often wondered since whether it would have made any difference if my father had still been alive, and we had gone up together according to the original plan.) And very soon after I returned from that fruitless expedition we all turned out of the rectory, taking what furniture we could find room for in the cottage, and leaving the rest to be disposed of at the auction that followed a day or two later.

The auction took place in the drawing-room, still decorated with some of Percy Cudden's paintings on the wall. Percy himself came over for it, and bought several things, and bid for a number of others, out of pure friendliness and desire to do me a good turn.

'Must start some of these lots off,' he explained cheerfully. 'Show the dealers that they aren't going to have things entirely their own way.' He was so cheerful that he actually made that auction, that I had dreaded more than anything, quite an amusing

function. And he knew something about furniture, too, and china, and even books. I remember his insisting on the auctioneer (who was old Wallop, of Fleckney, and knew him well) putting up two or three things again when he thought the dealers had got them too cheap.

'I had raised that bid,' he said to Wallop more than once. 'You knocked it down too quick. I must ask you to put it up again.'

And, though some of the dealers grumbled a good deal, Wallop actually obeyed. Cudden had a way of getting his orders carried out. I remember one lot of china figures that used to be on the drawing-room mantelpiece had gone to a bid of thirty shillings: he got them put up again and ran them up to nearly ten pounds.

'It only shows,' he said, when it was all over, and we were giving him tea at the cottage. 'It just shows the advantage of knowing even a little about values. I don't believe in that line about a little knowledge being a dangerous thing. I don't profess to be an expert about china, or furniture, but I do know that dealers will never give more than they are obliged. Of course, one gets let in a bit sometimes. I bought one or two lots that I didn't want at all.'

'Better get Wallop to put them up again to-morrow,' I suggested. 'He's having another sale at Fleckney, he told me.'

Percy Cudden's ingenuous countenance flushed a deep pink.

'The fact is,' he said, not without a little hesitation, 'I told him to send them along here. I hoped Miss—er—Mooney, and perhaps Miss Strange as well, would not mind my leaving them here. Sort of sentimental feeling about them, you know. Soon as I saw them put up, I felt I had to buy them.'

'I thought you said you didn't want them at all,' Elsie put in, with a distinct look of mischief in her eye.

'I did and I didn't,' said Percy, quickly recovering. 'They are no use to me, I admit, but I felt I should like awfully to give them to you, as a sort of memento of the happy years I spent at Ashe.'

It was the old Percy, flowery as ever—and yet, underneath, a good deal of real feeling. And when the purchases arrived (I suppose he had instructed one of Wallop's men to send them across) there were so many that Miss Mooney began to be seriously alarmed.

'Mr. Cudden could not have quite realised what a tiny place this is,' she kept on saying. 'Dear me! So good of him, really. Must have cost the poor boy a small fortune.'

But Elsie looked on the pile with a more favourable eye. She took charge of the man, and showed him where everything was to go. Most of it, as a matter of fact, went into my bedroom.

'You won't be there often enough to mind,' she said. 'Besides, we must stow it somewhere. That's the old chiffonier that used to be in the drawing-room. I don't suppose it would fetch much now, but it was good of Percy to get it. I suppose they have lots of money, those Cuddens.'

She spoke in dreamy tones. I felt I knew exactly what she was thinking. But possibly I did her an injustice.

'Percy is the only son,' I said. 'It's a good business, and he's clever enough to make the best of it. I should think he'll be something like a millionaire some day.'

She was another woman, in a flash.

'If it only wasn't stockings,' she explained. 'Somehow I never liked stockings—not that kind. They are such very poor ones, you know. Now, if they were really the Best Quality——'

'The stockings may be inferior quality,' I retorted, 'but Percy isn't. He's one of the very best.'

‘Dear Rudolf,’ she mocked me. ‘But they are all the very best, you know. That’s just where the trouble comes in. All except, of course, poor Reggie——’

She sighed, tragically, with intention.

‘Reggie!’ I spoke in a tone intended to convey the deepest loathing. ‘I wish to Heaven that fellow had never come here at all. He ruined everything.’

‘I don’t think any of you were ever quite fair to Reggie,’ she went on. ‘Jonny used to hate him. I often wondered what he was going to do. He looked at him sometimes as though he wanted to wring his neck.’

‘I expect he did,’ I said.

‘Such a pity,’ put in Miss Mooney, who was hovering about in the background, as usual. ‘All three such nice boys, really. Somehow I was afraid from the first that it would be a mistake. I expect you were all a little jealous of Mr. Hicks.’

‘Great heavens!’ I ejaculated. But I dare say she was more or less right. We were very well off without him: that was the root of the matter. We did not want any one else to come intruding into our Paradise. And then, he was not only quite useless as a companion, he was worse. Dangerous! I firmly believed, and believe still, for that matter, that he set himself from the very start to make trouble in the house. He wanted us to quarrel among ourselves. He did his very best to bring it about.

‘If I believed in a personal Devil,’ I said, ‘I should picture him as something like Reggie Hicks.’

At which Mooney, of course, held up her hands in horror.

‘My dear boy!’

‘You really must be careful what you say,’ Elsie put in. ‘Mooney’s getting on, you know. She’s not so strong as she was. For my part, I’ve always

thought it might be rather amusing to meet the Devil. After all, he must have been an aristocrat, in a way.'

'My dear Elsie! I don't think, even in joke——'

Poor Miss Mooney! She hated saying anything that could be construed into a reproach to Elsie, and yet—— This was going a little far. Like some old hen who has been entrusted with a brood of ducklings, she could not help fussing anxiously on the brink when she saw them taking to the deep waters of religious speculation.

II

Percy Cudden got into the habit of coming over from Fleckney two or three times a week before I left for Cambridge. He seemed to have blossomed out since his days of pupilage. He rode over now on horseback, having discarded his bicycle, and used to put his mount up at the Bassett Arms, which was the nearest of our three public-houses to the cottage, and look in about tea-time, dressed in the best pair of riding breeches he could get in Leicester, very tight at the knees and very wide everywhere else. And the most remarkable four-in-hand ties. And waistcoats of very mixed colours.

Yes! Percy had decidedly come out. He was almost too overpowering now, like a dahlia in full flower. And his manner was more flamboyant too. He paid more compliments than of old, and more obvious ones. He laid siege to Miss Mooney with his high-flown speeches. I thought she would come fluttering in to me soon with her suspicions. She did.

'Sometimes I rather wish the Cuddens were—in something else.'

'My dear Mooney, why? People will always wear stockings, I imagine. Or socks, at any rate. Don't you think it's safe, as a business?'

'Perhaps it is. I suppose they are really—very

wealthy—even compared to some of the best county families.'

'A good deal more so than most, I expect.'

She sighed, and proceeded to dilate on the change in the Habits and Customs of the Age. When she had been a girl, no one in her position would have dreamed of marrying outside her own class—except, of course, in just one or two isolated cases—usually terminating in almost immediate disaster. Things seemed different now. You saw Trade aspiring to alliance with the old aristocracy. Some of these brewers, for instance. I knew that young Burnett, our old pupil, had contracted an alliance with a daughter of Lord Brackley's.

I did, though I had never met the lady.

Well, perhaps a brewer was nothing so very much better than a stocking-maker. But she clearly did not like saying the word. For some inscrutable reason this weaving of stockings obstinately stuck at a lower level than beer-production. If it had been a cloth-mill, like some of those places she had seen at Leeds, she would not have minded half so much. Even a boot factory would have been better. At least, she thought so. No, perhaps not. Boots were very much the same sort of thing. Though leather, of course—

She wandered on.

'You see,' she began again, after I had listened to her dutifully for an hour or more, 'it seems to me that he has been coming over here a good deal lately.'

He had, indeed. It was sufficiently obvious.

'I can't help thinking—that he is beginning to pay serious attention to Elsie.'

I rather disconcerted her by laughing aloud.

'My dear Mooney, of course he is. I don't suppose Elsie minds, either. I must say I think she is perfectly capable of looking after herself.'

'And you wouldn't mind—yourself? I mean to

say, my dear boy, you are the Head of the Family now. I thought it only right that you should know how things were, in case——'

I made it clear that as Head of the Family I did not intend to interfere with the matrimonial projects of my sister more than was absolutely necessary. And as for Percy himself, I certainly liked him as well as any—eligible suitor I had yet seen.

'Oh, yes,' she breathed. 'Mr. Cudden has always been perfectly charming, in himself.'

'Well, it is only himself that we are concerned with—at present.'

Miss Mooney nodded her head several times with great rapidity. After all, there was time enough before anything serious was likely to happen. It was a pity he lived at Fleckney—but still. Fleckney was the kind of place that she would hate to live in, herself. But perhaps it might not be necessary for them always to stay there. They might buy a Seat, some little way out, when the old people were dead. Percy still had a father and mother living. A good-natured old pair—but from the social point of view! Miss Mooney did not think it worth while to conclude the sentence.

And that, of course, was the real crux of the situation. The old Cudden pair were rather terrible: so at least every one said who knew them. I had met them myself, once or twice, when Percy and I were going in to Fleckney every day about that pantomime of ours, and they seemed to me amiable enough, but I am quite ready to admit that my judgment on that point was not worth much. Mr. Cudden was weak in his aspirates, it is true; but then so were many other gentlemen of acknowledged position in the county. Old Sir Thomas Bellaston, of Willoughby, deliberately suppressed every possible aspirate in his conversation, and no one seemed to think any the worse of him for it. Mrs. Cudden was one of those stout, good-

natured ladies who radiate a general contentment with the world. She had married a successful manufacturer, and she had an only son who could not be matched in the county. I think both the parents regarded Percy as a prodigy of wit, learning, and good looks. And perhaps they were quite right. Certainly I never ceased to wonder how so vivid an intelligence could have sprung from so uninspiring a source.

Well, to look at it from a purely worldly standpoint, the two old people would have to be 'lived down'—supposing, for the sake of argument, that anything serious came of all this. And when Miss Mooney spoke like that (as I regret to say she did), I suppose she meant that the young pair would have to wait, more or less patiently, until they could step into their shoes. When the new generation were once firmly seated in command, at the head of the chief factory in Fleckney, their predecessors would be forgotten soon enough.

'Mr. Cudden is so clever,' mused Miss Mooney. 'If he plays his cards well, there is really no reason why he should not get into Parliament. They might even give him a title.'

She spoke to herself more than to me. A title, in her eyes, would make amends for almost anything. I believe she still dreamed, at intervals, of young Hicks coming back from Bingley Hall, with a formal proposal in his pocket. She would have loved to see two knights contending in the lists for Elsie's careless regard. Hicks was, at present, the best of the entry, so to speak. One day, if he lived long enough, he would indubitably be Sir Reginald. Yet even the Hicks family were not really good enough for Elsie: they were not one of the real old county families. And Reggie himself—well! the village, that hot-bed of gossip, was full of stories about his adventures.

Percy Cudden might be the safer of the two, in some ways.

Besides, Hicks had vanished. She did not even know whether he was at Bingley Hall or dodging about the Riviera with his father. There was, at the moment, no one else. What a thousand pities it was, thought Miss Mooney, that Elsie had not been born in the old days, when Ashe rectory was filled with young members of the aristocracy. She might have been a peeress by this time.

In the meantime, Percy developed the habit of coming over oftener and oftener. And really I hardly know what we should have done without him. He was indefatigable in contriving amusements for us—which was by no means an easy thing to do in that neighbourhood. He used to get a box for anything that came on at the Theatre Royal, in the county town, and carry off Miss Mooney and Elsie to see the latest London success, sent off to the provinces to recoup the promoters for all they had lost in the metropolis. He never seemed to mind how much he spent in the good cause. He fetched out the covered wagonette, that they kept at 'The George' at Fleckney for local balls and other entertainments, and used to drive us in to Leicester and back again, late at night. He took us for several picnics, too, bringing over the family landau with coachman and pair of horses complete, and all sorts of excellent comestibles packed away under the box-seat. There was never any one else at any of these entertainments. It was sufficiently clear that they were animated by one single purpose.

I suppose these things all had their effect, in time. The crisis, in fact, came one afternoon that summer, when he and Elsie were playing croquet together on the tiny lawn (if you could call it a lawn) that we had managed to shear into some semblance of smoothness at the back of the cottage. They had great fun over it, apparently. Percy could generally extract his quota of amusement out of most things. I had gone up to

my room after tea to do a little work. In a few minutes he came bounding up the narrow stairs and burst in.

I had never seen him quite so red in the face before, florid as he was apt to be.

'I've done it!' he said, and began walking up and down the room, with an occasional pirouette as he turned round. 'I've brought it off at last. Congratulate me.' And then, in a lower voice, 'By Jove, old man, isn't it wonderful?'

I wasn't going to pretend I did not know what he was talking about. And of course I was pleased enough. Elsie might have been a bit of a problem if she had been left on my hands. Just as well to get her safely settled early.

'Good!' I said, and we shook hands. 'I'd sooner it was you than any one I know.' Which was true enough, as far as it went. In my heart I was wondering all the time whether he really knew in the least what he was letting himself in for. What sort of wife would Elsie be likely to make? And here he was, looking so pathetically pleased over it. 'How did it all happen?'

He gave a short laugh. 'Oh, I don't know. Of course, it's only provisional. I mean to say, I'm not going to let her tie herself down.'

Percy sat down on the edge of the bed—I was working up in my bedroom, which indeed was the only room in the cottage which I had more or less to myself—and began to rhapsodise. From the very first minute he had ever seen her he had felt that she was his Fate. Only, of course, it was clear that every one would want her when they saw her. That was one reason why we all resented Hicks coming so much.

'As soon as I saw the fellow I knew we should have trouble with him,' he said, reflecting. He sighed. 'Poor chap! I suppose he was in love too, after his

fashion. I feel as if he couldn't have been altogether bad, now.'

'He was quite bad enough,' I protested.

'And then there was Jonny, too,' he went on. 'Poor old Jonny! How he did hammer him down at the Club!' He stopped abruptly, perhaps afraid he was hurting me by referring to that fatal afternoon. 'I say, I feel almost ashamed of myself, as though I had stolen a march on Jonny. I know how he must have felt about it. Lord, it must be the very deuce.' He was silent again, thinking. 'You know,' he concluded, rather lamely, 'it makes one feel for the other fellows, this sort of thing.'

I could not think of any suitable comment, and said nothing. But of course it would be a bit of a blow to Jonny. Not that he had ever cherished any hopes in the least. Besides, he liked Percy. If it had been Reggie Hicks now.

'I suppose he won't mind so very much.' Percy pursued the inevitable topic. 'You see, it's not as if he were—exactly——'

'Quite so,' I said a little drily. Miss Mooney might have put it in the same way. And probably she would have been perfectly right. It would not have done. There were all sorts of reasons. Still, I did not see that they were likely to soften the blow when it came.

And all the time, at the back of my brain, persisted a feeling of wonder at the extraordinary effect that Elsie produced on all these boys. It seemed inexplicable to me, this power of hers—as inexplicable as the magic of some conjuror. Here was Percy Cudden, whom I had always considered as level-headed a youth as was likely to be found in the county, completely thrown off his balance, hardly knowing which way up he stood, just because, apparently, Elsie had given him some sort of conditional encouragement. For he rather insisted on the fact that there was no definite

engagement. It was too soon yet for anything of the sort. He would not dream of taking any unfair advantage from what had happened. When a girl had been through a rotten time like that, of course she was hardly in a state to make up her mind on a subject like this. Chivalrous fellow, Percy.

Yes! She had captured Percy. And certainly Jonny Waring. And quite possibly Hicks as well. And then there was that fellow Sterndale: he was quite ready to become a victim. Every time they happened to meet you could see he only wanted a little encouragement to become one of the band. In fact, it really seemed as though she possessed some secret charm. Because, to the eye of a brother, there seemed uncommonly little about her to produce so great a result.

Mooney was in her train, too. I had forgotten Mooney. That was perhaps the most surprising feat of all, for Mooney had known her as long as I had. Perhaps the best way of explaining it was to lay the blame on myself. Brothers and sisters often failed to estimate each other justly. And then, she had never been in the least sympathetic with me. She had treated me, ever since I could remember, as an inferior being, quite unworthy of her confidence on any subject. I suppose this had its effect. Or possibly it really was a sort of blindness on my part.

I remember going out into the garden after Percy had left that evening, and finding her alone, and trying to discover what she really felt about it all. And I got no distance at all. She simply would not talk seriously that evening, on Percy or anything else.

'Bless me!' she said. 'If this isn't Rudolf come to catechise me.' And she made a little curtsy to me, like a child out of the village. 'Please, sir, I 'aven't 'ad time to learn it, not this week.'

I suppose I am a fool. Somehow I am conscious that

I could never hit off the right vein with Elsie. My wits were slow, unadaptable : her quick changes of mood used to leave me puzzled and vaguely annoyed. I knew it then, but for the life of me I could not help it.

‘ You needn’t say anything if you don’t want to,’ I said, rather sulkily, I am afraid. I had come out, really hoping to come to a better understanding. I thought she might be in a softened mood. But Elsie was only in a mood to tease.

She gave a little laugh. ‘ Well, perhaps not. Though I suppose he really is the Head of the Family.’ She put her finger in her mouth and swayed to and fro on one leg—a picture of rustic shyness. ‘ That Mr. Cudden do talk nice,’ she said. ‘ I couldn’t ’elp but listen to him.’

‘ I say, I do hope you ’re a little serious about it all.’

She gave a pirouette on the lawn. ‘ Serious ? Why, of course. Life is a very serious matter.’

‘ I mean to say, it’s a matter of life or death to Percy.’

She laughed again. ‘ Poor old Percy ! He’s not a bad sort—only, I think I should like him better if he were just a trifle less polite. So boring.’

‘ Is that all you have to say about him ? He spoke of you as though you were a—sort of goddess.’

‘ And in your opinion, I suppose, I’m just the opposite. It’s a sad world. I suppose the poor fellow is deceiving himself. Still, so long as he’s happy——’

And she went off, singing some tune over softly to herself, which was her way when she fancied she had scored off some one. I went back to my room, feeling rather sore. I wanted to be friends, and somehow it seemed as though I could never get into touch. And I was anxious about Percy, and rather wondering about Jonny, and whether I should write and tell him what had happened. I went to bed, still wondering.

III

And Percy came over again the next morning, more buoyant than ever. I could not help thinking of a balloon whenever I looked at him—a highly ornamented balloon, full of gas, with a bright red fringe on the top, sailing merrily over the fields. He wanted to do all sorts of things for us, to show his devotion. The things he suggested during those few weeks that still remained to me before I left for Cambridge were at once ingenious and innumerable. He wanted particularly, I remember, to build us a sort of annexe, with a stable for the pony and coach-house for the little pony carriage. Absurd, that we should have to quarter our property on old Harrison, paying away good money for the privilege!

‘I can’t understand a man like Harrison,’ he said to me privately. ‘After all he owes to your family, trying to squeeze a few pounds out of you by offering to let an old tumble-down stable at an exorbitant price. I’ve a darned good mind to go and have a talk with him.’

‘For Heaven’s sake, don’t!’ I begged. ‘You can’t expect every one to feel exactly like yourself in these matters. Nicholas isn’t in love with Elsie.’

‘Isn’t he? Then by Gad he ought to be ashamed of himself.’ Percy’s red face grew redder still. ‘’Pon my soul, old chap, I can’t understand the people about here. They’re just swine—Gadarene swine—who have had pearls thrown before them so long that they take no further interest in them. Look here, let me take this in hand on my own. I should love to manage a bit of building for Tom King. D’you remember how we got him to do the old barn?’

Tom King was the Big Man of the village now. Builder and contractor. They had invited him over

to Willoughby to build the new rectory and restore the old church.

I pointed out to the ardent lover that we really couldn't afford to start building just now. Building was a job that grew upon you : it was simple enough to start with a small scheme, but before you knew where you were, it had grown into a hundred pounds or more. We wanted to save.

The slightest opposition to one of his projects always inflamed Percy. He would have done the whole thing off his own bat if I had not insisted that I could not allow such a thing. After all, he must permit us to have some proper pride. And then, of course, the other two brought up their arguments.

'I really don't see what it has to do with you,' said Elsie. 'If he chooses to make me a present of a stable and coach-house, let him ! Better than paying old Harrison Heaven knows how much a year, and having to go up there every time we want the carriage for a drive.'

And Miss Mooney, much in the same vein.

'Of course, my dear boy, I know how you feel about it—exactly. But, under the circumstances, don't you think it might be considered—allowable ? Practically engaged, as you say ! Of course, extraordinarily generous. But a hundred pounds or so, what is it to a family like that ?'

For the engagement, such as it was, remained a secret. It was not to be announced for a year. In the first place, said Percy, it was too soon after the Canon's death, and in the second place Elsie might conceivably find that she had made a mistake. There was a decidedly Quixotic touch about Percy. He would have cheerfully agreed to any arrangement whatsoever that promised to make life even a trifle easier for her.

I had to put my foot down. At any rate, I refused

to let him do any brick-and-mortar building. The result was that he got John Arnold to run up a sort of rustic coach-house in the field at the back of our tiny garden, combining with it a sufficient shed for the pony, and also a sort of summer-house for the benefit of Elsie and Miss Mooney. John was getting on in years, but a good workman. He made an excellent job of it—but I expect it cost Percy pretty nearly as much as he would have had to pay for the original scheme.

As for the other improvements he wanted to make in the estate, their name was legion. He complained that we had no room for anything in our garden—which was true enough—and insisted that he should get a few lads up from the village to level a piece of the field for tennis. Elsie was not particularly keen on tennis, so we managed to put him off that. But there was hardly a day that he had not some new suggestion to make for our better comfort. He would bring over some ‘little offering,’ as he called them, like a new mowing machine for the lawn, or some patent contrivance for the kitchen.

‘Rotten old place, Fleckney,’ he explained. ‘But it’s wonderful what you can pick up there if you keep your eyes open. Got this at Preston’s. Told him to look out for anything new in the ironmongery line.’

‘Look here,’ I said for the twentieth time, ‘we haven’t room in the place for all these things, you know. It’s awfully good of you, but we shan’t be able to move soon.’

‘Well, when you really can’t move, perhaps Elsie will—let me find her a house somewhere.’ Percy had some difficulty in bringing this out. He was curiously shy about saying anything that bore on their future marriage.

IV

The engagement, as I have said, was to be secret, so I could not well say anything to Jonny about it. Since he had taken up his work at Leicester I had seen very little of him. Once he had ridden over to us on his bicycle, and spent a Sunday afternoon with us (chiefly with me, as a matter of fact, for there was some special children's service on in the afternoon which Miss Mooney and Elsie thought it their duty to attend). And I had been to see him twice at his Leicester lodgings, which were in a neat little house half-way up a most infernally noisy stone-paved lane. He lived there with a small, misshapen man called Herrick, who was timekeeper at his works, and a Miss Herrick, his daughter, who appeared to do the housework.

I stayed a night with him there once. And Herrick, I remember, talked all through the evening about cricket. A remarkable fellow, that crippled timekeeper. He was a cricket enthusiast, though I do not suppose he had ever played a game himself in his life. But he certainly kept the flame alive in his own circle. He had organised a club some ten years before, which had now attained to some position in the town. He had an eye for a potential cricketer: as soon as any one of that sort came to take up a job at the Coventry works he would get him down to the recreation ground and see him tried out at the nets at once.

'Jonny Waring?' he said to me, chuckling. 'Why, soon as I saw him I knew we'd got hold o' something good. Got 'is father's action all over. Jonny'll be in the county eleven afore the end o' the year. They've not come round to ask me what I've got yet—but they will.'

And, as a matter of fact, the county authorities

generally were not above taking a hint or two from old Herrick, when they were on the look-out for new blood. He was as well known on the Aylestone Road ground as any one. And he had provided three or four young colts who turned out more than useful.

That was early in the season. And now, just as it was drawing to a close, in August, Jonny got his chance. He sent me a line to say it was coming off. Our last home match, against Sussex.

‘I got a lot of wickets in our last three matches here,’ he wrote. ‘Average for the season works out at 6·35 runs per wicket, which is not too bad. Herrick has been getting more and more excited: at last he got hold of Marriott up on the county ground and insisted on my having a trial. They pay a lot of attention to Herrick here. And he does know a lot about the game, besides being as keen as mustard. I hope you’ll manage to come over and see some of the match. I don’t know if the ladies would care to come as well.’

That was how Jonny put it, as though I didn’t know exactly what he meant.

Elsie was not enthusiastic about the game, but she thought it might be amusing to go, and accordingly she and I drove to Ockington and took the train into Leicester as early one Monday morning as I could persuade her to come. It was towards the end of perhaps the driest season we had enjoyed for many years—a wonderful year for cricket, and especially for batsmen. Big scores had been the order of the day all through. And I regret to say that my own county had not been doing any too well.

I thought Elsie was going to be bored to death. It was a sultry sort of day, and we were sitting in the open most of the time. And it was a long, long time before anything much happened. Sussex had won the toss, and they opened the batting in a manner

that suggested they could stay there a week or so without undue trouble. Runs came at a steady rate, and Jonny did a lot of running in the deep field, but that was all.

'They've forgotten he's a bowler at all, I believe,' I said.

'I don't think I can stand very much more of this,' said Elsie, stifling a yawn with difficulty.

They were something like eighty for no wickets when the first incident of any importance (from my point of view) happened. That was a hefty drive off the slow bowler that looked like reaching the boundary easily. Starting off at full speed, and going like a hare, Jonny just managed to intercept it before it got to the rails. It was a very smart piece of fielding getting there at all. But in addition to that he picked up so smartly and returned so hard that the striker, who had gone for a second run, and then hesitated, found himself run out. He failed to get back by a full yard.

'By Jove,' I said, 'that's a fine bit of work. One up to our side.'

Whether it was this bit of fielding that reminded our captain I don't know, but they put Jonny on to bowl when the next man came in, and he got four wickets before luncheon. That was a bit of a surprise all round. The ground began to hum with excited conversation. Something of a colt, this Waring.

'I suppose you'll wait now,' I said to Elsie.

But I doubt very much if she would have waited if Bob Sterndale hadn't suddenly appeared, out of the blue. I hadn't seen him for the better part of a year, but there he was, just the same as ever, ready to take on his job as one of Elsie's followers at a moment's notice. With the result that he took us out to lunch somewhere during the interval. And then we came back, and fell in with Burnett, the brewer.

‘Why aren’t you playing?’ I asked, when he had come up and made himself known. (Elsie, of course, was the attracting force all the time.) Burnett was our old pupil, who had brought a team down to Ashe once or twice in the old days.

‘Getting too old.’ He looked down at his figure comically. And indeed he was rather rounder than was quite convenient for quick work in the field.

‘I say,’ he said, nodding towards Jonny. ‘That youngster ought to make good. What’s he going to do?’

‘We were going up to Cambridge together,’ I said.

‘Of course you were. I remember. Well, isn’t he going now?’

I explained, as well as I could, that my father’s sudden death had rather complicated matters.

Burnett frowned, considering.

‘Wish I’d known that before,’ he said. ‘Might have managed something. That boy would make a lot of difference to the Cambridge team. They want a fast bowler.’

I shrugged my shoulders. ‘It wouldn’t have been any good. He’s the most obstinate chap I know. I wanted him to come up with me—more than anything—but he wouldn’t. Too independent.’

‘Son of the Ashe blacksmith, wasn’t he?’ Sterndale chipped in.

‘And a rattling good cricketer too,’ added Burnett. ‘About the best bowler we ever had for the county. Getting a bit past his best when I knew him. But this youngster ought to be a champion. I must look him up. Where do you say he is now?’

I told him.

‘One of Herrick’s pups, is he? I must look into this.’ And Burnett turned away.

‘Our Mr. Burnett!’ said Elsie scoffingly. ‘I think

he might have condescended to speak to poor little me. However, he's going to do something for Jonny. Bet you half a crown he does.'

'Don't see what he can do exactly,' said Sterndale. 'Might put him on the ground staff, I suppose.'

Elsie laughed. 'Bob is one of those haughty aristocrats,' she explained. 'Let the blacksmith stick to his anvil—and all that sort of thing, you know. Now I should rather like to see Jonny Waring bowling all your Oxford men out.' For Bob Sterndale came from the opposition shop.

'Bet you six pairs of gloves he never goes to Cambridge, and six more he never plays cricket for them if he does.' I have an idea that Sterndale did not altogether like the way she spoke of Jonny. Too friendly altogether. It was true he suffered slightly from aristocratic leanings.

She turned to me. 'I have a sort of feeling he will. Strange, but true. Mr. Head of the Family, may I take him?'

'You may do just as you please,' I said. And indeed I was getting a trifle tired of this persistent Head of the Family idea. I did not think I had done anything to deserve it. It was Mooney, if any one, who was responsible for starting it.

'Then I'll take you,' said Elsie. 'What is more, I'll accept a limit of time, which in the excitement of the moment you don't appear to have considered. Let us say within four years.'

Sterndale's eyes followed her every expression with open admiration. And she was different now—altogether different from the girl she had been when he first turned up. She was alive, animated, sparkling. She kept it up, too, until we had nearly reached home again. But then Bob insisted on coming back to Ockington with us.

*Chapter III**A Subscription Dinner*

I

It was when I had been up at Mike's for the better part of my first term, and had been seduced (much against my will) into becoming an active member of the boat club, to the extent of steering ('coxing' was the general term) one of the College Trial Eights, that I saw the man Burnett again. I had not expected him to notice me, I admit, when I saw him in Trinity Street walking with no less a person than Bazalgette, who had been captain of the 'Varsity cricket team the year before. But I will say for Burnett that he never forgot me. I think he must have been especially fond of my father.

I was a trifle embarrassed at being introduced to the great Bazalgette. But of course he was not particularly great in Burnett's eyes.

'Mr. Strange, of Mike's! Don't know if you happen to have met. Bit of a cricketer, and a very old friend of mine.'

It made me blush, as they say, all down my back. But Bazalgette did not seem to mind. These great men are sometimes extremely pleasant to their humble admirers. And from afar I had admired Bazalgette, following his meteoric career in the public press. He had played for the Gentlemen at Lord's, and his style was always held up as a model to the youth of the country in those days. Bazalgette's off-drive was taught at all the best public schools.

'Look here,' said Burnett, sticking his arm into mine in the friendliest manner possible, 'you just happen to be the very man I was looking for. Buzzer, this is the fellow who can do the trick. We shall want him.' He turned abruptly to me again. 'I say, come and dine with me and the rest at the Bull to-night. Seven sharp.'

He took me quite aback. I began to stammer out excuses about having work to do, or some nonsense of that sort. The fact is, I was so infernally shy in those days that my first impulse was always to decline everything. I must have missed no end of chances in life from this habit of mine.

Burnett, however, clapped me on the back in a manner that made me choke.

'Look here, you're not as studious as all that, your first year.' He laughed heartily. It was all very well for him, with the physique of a bull and no nerves whatever. 'Besides, we must have you. No rot.'

I recovered myself with some difficulty.

'Oh, all right,' I said, lamely.

'That's the stuff.' He turned to Bazalgette again. 'Strange has the fellow in his pocket,' he said cryptically. 'Now we want one or two enthusiasts, with a bit of money.'

'We've got St. John,' Bazalgette put in. 'I asked him this morning. Don't know about the money, but he's dead keen.'

'Well, then, let's get some of the authorities. Must get them on the right side. I'll look in and ask my old tutor while I'm about it.'

'I suppose you mean to have him at Mike's,' said Bazalgette, a little enviously, as I thought. He was a Jesus man himself.

Burnett laughed again. 'Why, certainly. Must give the old place a leg up. Kill two birds with one stone, eh?'

I confess all this was Greek to me, or even worse. I was so confused that I could not follow clearly all they were saying. Indeed, they mentioned a lot of names between them that I have totally forgotten by now. I happen to remember St. John because he was a person of importance up at Fenner's in those days. I gathered vaguely that they must have been discussing cricket, in

some form or other. But I was concerned all the time with my own troubles—what I should wear, and how I should manage to think of anything to say to my neighbours, and whether I should be able to stand more than a glass or two of wine, and how I should get back again to college if they plied me too heavily. Yes, in those days I certainly used to meet my troubles more than half-way.

The two went in under Mike's tall gateway, talking all the time, Burnett just turning to wave a hand at me and call out, 'Seven sharp, mind!' And I followed, modestly falling behind, and so up to my rooms, where I brewed some tea and sat down to reading up my notes on the morning's Pindar lecture. And most of the time I was doing no good at all because my mind kept repeating that I had been a fool to accept. What on earth did they want me for? And why couldn't I stick to my resolution when I had once refused?

II

I am almost inclined to think that the more one dreads experiences of this kind the more salutary they are. Often, too, they are the very things that, looking back, one would not have missed for anything. I mean to say, they are actually pleasant as well as salutary, when once we have got over the initial shyness. I admit I felt very much like a fish out of water, at first. We were shown up into a private room, laid for dinner, with a whole crowd of men whom I had never seen before in my life standing round the fireplace. One or two I recognised. There was our Senior Tutor, Wilks, tall and thin and cadaverous, who was reported to wear the largest boots in the University, and had a grizzled beard and spectacles, but for all that was no end of an enthusiast for college sport in general. He used to attend everything—

racers on the river and football matches and cricket (so I heard, for of course we had not seen any cricket yet) —and cheer on the participants from the ring. I had already been coached by him: as cox of a Trial Eight I had watched him painfully trotting along the tow-path in a college blazer and an old pair of shorts while we bucketed down the sluggish stream, stopping every few hundred yards to receive exhortation and reproof. Then I had seen St. John once or twice. And Burnett was there himself, of course, very red in the face and neck, and looking as though he sampled his own excellent brew several times a day. But he didn't see me when I came in, and I was much too shy to attract his notice. I hung about in the background as much as I could, trying hard not to get too much in the way of the others.

That, I admit, is not the comfortable part of the entertainment. How many times have I not hung about in corners and doorways asking myself what the deuce I was doing there at all! And, as I have said, how many times have I not congratulated myself afterwards on the fact that I had forced myself to go! But this was the first time, so far, that I had dined out of college at all. And, looking round, it seemed that I was about the only undergraduate present. Bazalgette was staying up, to go through the second part of some tripos, but he had taken his degree.

Wilks came up to me, rubbing his hands (he always rubbed his hands together before he addressed any of us), and was affable.

'Mr. Burnett tells me you are a bit of a cricketer,' he said. 'We may want you next summer. Most of our big men have gone down.'

What did Burnett mean by going round to every one talking about my cricket? No one knew better than he did how very moderate a performer I was.

‘I’m afraid I’m not much good, sir,’ I said modestly.

‘We sadly need a bowler,’ he went on, disregarding my protestation altogether. ‘A good bowler would have a very fair chance of getting his blue.’

My thoughts went at once to Jonny, naturally.

‘These young men of the present day,’ he pursued his subject steadily, ‘are all batsmen. We don’t seem to get the bowlers we used to.’

He chafed his bloodless hands, and smiled ingratiatingly into his grizzled beard.

‘I wish I could have persuaded my friend Waring to come up,’ I said. And then I suddenly thought of the character in Dickens, who was always saying things ‘in a burst of confidence.’ I stopped abruptly.

‘Waring? Ah, yes.’ He spoke as though the name was perfectly familiar to him. ‘He has some—er—reputation as a bowler, I believe.’

I was a little surprised at the way he recognised the name. Still, Waring was a county bowler now. I supposed Burnett must have mentioned him.

‘And why did he refuse to come up to Cambridge?’ Wilks went on, with the same crooked smile, half hidden in his beard.

I hesitated a little.

‘The last time Canon Strange wrote to me,’ said the Senior Tutor, ‘I certainly gathered that his—er—protégé was to accompany you. Your father thought very highly of the young man. But more as a mathematician, I think, than as a cricketer. I understood he was coming up to try for a scholarship.’

‘So he was. My father always wanted us to come up together. I had been looking forward to it for years. And then he decided he wouldn’t come.’ I thought for a moment, and added, ‘He didn’t think there was money enough for both of us.’

Dinner was announced, and we went in together.

I was rather glad to find Wilks sitting next me. He was about the only man there, except our host, with whom I had ever exchanged half a dozen words.

Looking back, I suppose he was gently extracting from me all the information relative to Jonny Waring that he could get. But at the time, I admit, it never occurred to me. I only thought he was pleasantly sympathetic. And I hadn't talked about Jonny for so long that I was glad to remind myself of him by trying to picture him for some one else. Indeed, I had done very little talking of any sort since the beginning of term. I was not of those who make friends quickly: so far, I suppose I must have been about the loneliest man in college. If it had not been for that admirable college servant, Mrs. Perrott, I might have been even lonelier than I was. It was entirely owing to her good offices that I got to know Germain, the man who lived opposite me on my staircase, and Fagge, from the floor below. At that time, I think, they had each been into my rooms once.

III

'I suppose,' said Wilks, some little time later, when we had arrived at the chicken and salad course, 'that your young friend Waring might be induced to—er—reconsider his determination, if the—er—money difficulty were removed.'

It was not exactly that he cleared his throat, but he checked slightly when he came to these expressions, almost as though they were real obstacles to his stride and wanted a little consideration before he could make up his mind to take them.

I looked at him in surprise. And then it began, for the first time, to dawn upon me what was happening.

'I don't know. It's difficult to say exactly what

Jonny Waring is likely to do. He gets ideas into his head—and then he's liable to be very obstinate. I say, is there really any chance? Is that what we're here for?'

It was tremendously exciting. For a moment I hardly knew what I was saying. Wilks continued to smile crookedly. He avoided meeting my eye. I learned later that he never looked any one straight in the face if he could avoid it. In his way, he was probably every bit as shy as I was.

'Well! I suppose that has something to—er—do with it. I rather expect our friend Burnett has a scheme to unfold. Presently. When he thinks we are sufficiently warmed to—er—receive it in the right spirit.'

'I see.' And at the moment I felt as though my eyes had been veritably opened for the first time. 'I could not imagine why he asked me. I don't quite know now.'

Wilks was of opinion that if there was one thing in the world (presumably outside the region of beer) that really roused enthusiasm in the soul of young Burnett, it was cricket. And especially Cambridge cricket. In his half shame-faced manner, as though he were confessing to some secret vice, he admitted that the exploits of his own university in the cricket field had a certain interest for himself as well. Not that he had anything like Burnett's excuse.

'Never any good at the game myself,' he explained. 'But no more was St. John—and he thinks of nothing else. The fact is, when you get an old fellow like me, Mr. Strange, you have to take up some hobby.'

I had no reply to make. The fact was, I was thinking about Jonny, and whether he would allow himself to be persuaded, and if so, when he would come. What would be the earliest date? I wondered

whether I could arrange for him to have rooms somewhere near my own. I resolved to put the case to Wilks. He seemed a nice, kindly old fellow. Would he have to wait for a whole year?

'We should want him for the Easter term,' Wilks thought. No, there need not be any difficulty about that. Young men often entered then. But of course he did not know, any more than I did, exactly what scheme Burnett meant to propound. Time would show. Judging from certain signs, he thought in a few minutes. . . . Yes! our host was going to say something.

I admit I was excited. And the whole room was applauding. Wilks was knocking the table with the handle of his knife, gently but methodically. I used my wine-glass, which naturally enough snapped in two at about the third tap.

'Steady!' murmured Wilks in my ear. 'Take a knife, or—er—fork. Comes cheaper in the end.'

The waiter was coming round with more drink. A new wine-glass appeared by my side, as though it had miraculously sprouted, full of sparkling champagne. I took a sip, to pull myself together.

No! Burnett was nothing of a speaker. I felt myself regarding him with an affectionate contempt. He hammered and stammered out a few phrases. He wanted us to fill our glasses (they had already been filled for us) and drink to the health of Cambridge cricket. He knew that was a toast that would appeal to all of us: that was the reason why he had asked us there—a few friends on whose support he could rely when it came to the point. He might be wrong, but it seemed to him that next year they would have rather a difficult row to hoe—no! that was hardly the right expression—rather a difficult pitch to play on. That was hardly what he wanted to say either, because after all it was the bowling that promised to be our weak

point. He did not know what had happened to English bowling, but for some reason or other they did not seem to turn them out—he meant good bowlers—at our public schools as they used to in his time. He could not point out a single bowler of any eminence among the freshmen this year. And it would not be giving away any secret to say that we wanted one or two pretty badly, if we were to do any good next season. For we had not a single regular bowler left in the team.

The speaker was getting into his stride better now, having surmounted the first few obstacles. When he went on to say that he knew he was a damned poor speaker there were even a few cries of 'No, no!' mingled with the general applause and laughter. We might say what we liked, but he knew his limitations. Nothing would get him up on his legs as a rule, but this was an exception. Because he happened to know of a young man who, but for a most unfortunate occurrence, would have been an undergraduate there to-day. It was practically arranged—and then—well! he had been given to understand that it fell through because of money trouble. Now, he knew this young fellow, and he thought, if they all put their heads together, or perhaps their hands in their pockets, they might be able to do something about it. He meant to say, it was not as though he were asking them to award a scholarship, so to speak, to a young man solely because he happened to be a county bowler, and one who, so far as the speaker could see, was quite likely to become an England bowler in due course. Yes, he was not saying that merely to get at them: he meant every word of it. Name? Of course they could have the name: he wasn't asking them to buy a pig in a poke. It was young Waring, who had played for Leicestershire in the last match of the season, and taken six wickets for thirty-five runs.

It was out. I found myself, in the excitement of the

moment, hammering on the table with a tumbler. It cracked in my hand. I was aware of Wilks regarding me out of the corner of his eye. I pulled myself together with a considerable effort.

'Seems to me,' I said, 'the glass at this establishment is of decidedly inferior quality.'

I was absurdly proud at having delivered this sentence safely. A good sentence. And, moreover, a sentence that proved the speaker to be absolutely sober. I mean to say, no one who was anywhere near the danger point would have selected a sentence like that. Would they? Clearly not.

Apologetically as ever, with his crooked smile half concealed in his grizzled beard, Wilks made bold to suggest that perhaps a knife handle would be safer. Or a fork.

I took a fork.

Like many other inexperienced speakers Burnett did not quite know when he had made his point. He would perhaps have done well to sit down then. But he went maundering on for several minutes longer, until most of the good effect he had produced had worn off. Then he seemed to recognise that the enthusiasm of the meeting was waning.

'Well, I think I've said about enough.' He decided at last it was time to wind up and get to business. 'Told you I was nothing of a speaker, and I'm not. But this young fellow I was telling you about—I want him to have a chance. I've had my eye on him for some time, and he's going to do something in the world. Eh? I mean what I say; and a chap who plays for England when he's still an undergraduate—mind you, I don't say he's going to do that, but I do say he has as good a chance of it as any one I've seen in the last few years—well! all I can say is, in spite of what any of these eminent scholars like my old tutor, whom I see over there, may think about it—'

But the speaker had lost his way, embarking on a sentence altogether beyond his powers. He came to an abrupt stop, running his hand through his hair with a comical expression of dismay.

'Fact is, I've forgotten what I was going to say. But that's the point I want to put before the meeting. Here's a young fellow who is going to do the University credit as a bowler and perhaps elsewhere as well. What are you going to do about it?'

And, feeling that at last he had got a satisfactory round of applause, Burnett sat down in a hurry.

There was a long pause. No one seemed anxious to make the next move. A sort of subdued hum went round the table, in which one could occasionally catch the name of Waring. Who was this Waring? Had there not been a Waring in the Leicestershire team some years ago? Any relation? And so on, but no one got up to propose any further action.

'I say.' I turned to Wilks. 'Isn't anything going to happen? They aren't going to let it drop, are they?'

The old man pulled his beard.

'I think they're just waiting for a lead,' he said.

I suppose it was that phrase that started me off. Normally, of course, to get up and attempt to say anything in a company of my elders would have been the very last thing I should have dreamed of doing. But just then I was not normal. I must have imbibed at least four or five glasses of champagne, besides some sherry which was handed round earlier in the banquet. And I was totally unused to drink—beyond a glass of port very occasionally after dinner at home, on some great occasion. Besides, I wanted above everything to get Jonny Waring up, in spite of himself. It would be too galling if nothing happened after all, just for want of a lead.

I got up suddenly, holding firmly to the table (which

was perhaps just as well). And my brain, which seemed up to that time to have been buzzing merrily in my head like a circular saw, cleared miraculously, so that I saw exactly what I meant to say stretching out before me as in a line of printed characters. I was not going to embark in anything complicated: I had sense enough left to see that I should only get lost. Once entangled, anything might happen. And I was conscious of old Wilks, fingering his grizzled beard by my side, looking up with a certain apprehension. He had every right to look a little anxious, as I recognised. For I could only keep myself steady on my legs by holding very firmly to that table. At the back of my head I kept wondering what would happen if I collapsed on to his shirt front. Would I be sent down, or would they hush it up and give me another chance?

There was a momentary dead silence. Nobody recognised me. But then Burnett hammered on the table with something—I suppose to encourage me—and I heard myself speaking.

And, once I had begun, I did not feel nervous in the least. It was all so perfectly simple. There in front of me stretched the printed line that I had to repeat. I saw it all so clearly that if I had known anything about printing I could no doubt have said what type had been used to set up the words. I have experienced something of the same sort since, though never quite to the same extent. Perhaps because I have not often risen to speak in quite the same condition.

‘If there is going to be a fund raised for Mr. Waring’s expenses,’ I said, with great distinctness of articulation, ‘I should like to have the honour of putting my name down for a hundred pounds. Provided that my name is not mentioned in this connection.’

I was in my chair again, and it seemed to me that

the room was rocking with applause. I suppose really the guests were a little surprised at the only undergraduate present coming out with such an offer, so suddenly. But, whatever they may have thought, it did serve to start the meeting on the right lines. Having accomplished this, I confess I remember very little more of that famous dinner. I am not even very clear how I got home when it was all over—but I have a suspicion that the Senior Tutor laid a restraining hand on my arm when I expressed a desire to run all the way. Vaguely I remember his saying something to the effect that more haste often led to less speed. (If he did not actually use these words, they were decidedly the words that one would have expected him to employ on such an occasion.) I found myself in bed next morning, not very much the worse for my exploit, except for a headache and a sense of dryness about the throat. The greater part of that morning I spent in the hourly expectation of being sent for by the authorities. Every time Mrs. Perrott came into the room I waited for her to say that the Senior Tutor would like to see me in his rooms. But he sent no message. The only allusion he ever made to that evening was when I had to take him up a Greek Prose a day or two afterwards.

‘You’ve not been heading any more subscriptions, I hope, Mr. Strange,’ was all he said, fingering his beard as though he were trying to conceal his crooked smile.

Wilks and I became very good friends. He was a bachelor, with a sense of humour, and he was supposed to know more about Latin inscriptions than any one at the University. Photographs of various epitaphs from the Appian Way and elsewhere adorned his walls. I learned something by attempting to puzzle them out on occasions when he was not quite ready for me.

IV

Burnett went down to the country the next day, but not before coming to look me up again in my rooms. He was alone this time. And he looked as aggressively healthy as usual. I never knew any one who carried about with him such an air of general well-being. I was conscious, looking at him, that he must be thinking me an uncommonly poor specimen that morning.

'Well, we didn't do so badly last night,' he began. 'Thanks to you very largely. You gave 'em a real good start. I say, you know, I don't want to take as much as all that from you. I didn't ask you there as a subscriber: it was because I wanted your help afterwards.'

I explained that I meant it all, every word of it. I felt that we owed him more than that, in any case. It had been an understood thing that we—that is to say, my father or the family in general—were going to pay for his Cambridge career.

'I see. Then that's all right. I thought, perhaps, in the excitement of the moment you might have bitten off a bit more than you cared about.'

'Not in the least. I dare say I made rather a fool of myself, but, you see, I was awfully keen on its going through. I want to get Jonny up here more than anything.'

'Excellent! So do I. And now we shall want you to help us in the next step. You see, I rather gather he's one of those touchy blokes. You know what I mean. Mightn't like it if I came along without so much as "By'r leave, sir," and offered him a matter of seven or eight hundred as a present for a good boy, eh? What d'you think? Would he be likely to cut up rough?'

I laughed. There was something rather engaging

about this big, red-faced, healthy-looking brewer. As to 'cutting up rough'—no! I didn't think it at all likely. But there was no doubt he was an obstinate fellow.

'It's that whip-back of his off the pitch I want,' said Burnett, reminiscent. 'Lord! how he'd run through them at Lord's on a fast wicket!'

I stood up with my back to the fire, thinking. We must get him, somehow. Certainly I would do my best. Should I write to him and see what happened?

'Couldn't get any influence to work, I suppose?' the other suggested. 'Sort of chap who'll be led but not driven, eh? I was wondering, now, whether you could get Miss Strange to say a word or two. You see, your sister has a way with her.'

I looked up quickly. Did Burnett guess anything, or was he merely talking at random? His red face, with rather congested light blue eyes, gave away nothing. Obviously he wanted to leave no stone unturned.

'Get any friend of his to put in a word or two,' he went on breezily. 'There was that chap you had with you at Ashe—what was his name, now? Red hair, if I remember right.'

'Percy Cudden. Yes, he might be able to do something. At least——'

I could not very well have them both working on him together, things being as they were. Or perhaps it did not really matter as much as I fancied. After all, he would have to know the truth some day: the sooner he guessed it the sooner it would be over.

'Yes, I dare say Percy might be able to persuade him,' I said. 'I'll write to him to-night.'

'Good. I'd go myself and have a talk with the fellow, only I should probably make a mess of it if I did. I go too straight at my fences, that's what is the matter with me. Want more finesse, they tell me.'

Fact is, you know, the less I have to do with the show the better, on the surface. All our young friend need know is that he's been appointed to the Ashe scholarship at St. Michael's College. Worth two hundred a year for four years. Restricted to candidates born in the village of Ashe——'

'He wasn't, as a matter of fact.'

'Well, make it resident. Point is, you see, make him understand it's been founded in memory of the dear old Canon. See? That ought to fetch him all right.'

'By the way, who is treasurer of the fund? I ought to pay in my subscription.'

Burnett laughed good-humouredly.

'Pay it when you like,' he said. 'No need to be in a hurry, seeing that he isn't likely to come up for another six months, at the earliest.'

But I insisted. I suppose I had not yet quite got over the thrill of bringing out the nice fat cheque-book, and writing my name under sums that a few months ago would have meant untold wealth to any of us. Besides, I always had a feeling of discomfort hanging about me so long as I owed anything.

'No good drawing it to me,' he went on. 'I'm keeping in the background. Draw it to Wilks: he consented to act as treasurer.'

So I drew it to Wilks, and took it in to him with my next Greek Prose. It made a quite effective retort when he asked whether I had been heading any more subscriptions.

v

Burnett went off, and I sat down and wondered what I had better do to promote the cause.

I began a letter to Elsie, and then I began another to Percy Cudden, and finally tore them both up and walked up and down the room, considering. I could

not see any way of persuading him to accept, if he had made up his mind to stick to his present job. I thought of getting Wilks to write him a plain official statement of the case. But then he would probably write and decline at once, and that might put a stop to the whole thing. Perhaps the best thing to do was for me to break it to him gently, at first, and see what happened next.

It was an uncommonly difficult letter to write, and it took me a long time to finish it. But I did at last, and sent it off the same afternoon, as I was going down to the river.

I thought it as well to emphasise the fact that this endowment had been raised with the object of carrying out my father's wishes. That would have its effect on him. Of course I had been immensely gratified at finding the affectionate remembrance in which he was held, after so many years. (I did not altogether like writing this, but something of the sort had to be said.) And then, of course, I laid stress on the advantage it would be from my own point of view to have him up as a companion. There I could let myself go freely. For it may as well be admitted that I was very much alone in those early days. It was still early in my first term, but I had hardly got to know any one at all, so far, except the two men on my staircase whom I have already mentioned. And of those Fagge was a Rugby football player, thought to have a good chance of a blue at full back, and Germain (though I did not find that out till later) was said to hold prayer-meetings in his room, and there were even rumours that he had been heard preaching on a Sunday evening on Parker's Piece. I had not really anything in common with either of them. And yet they were the only two men I had exchanged a word with, except the men on either side of me in hall, and an occasional rowing man down at the boat-house.

I did want a friend pretty badly, it seemed to me.

I sent the letter off, as I say, and it was not until I got back to my rooms again that I suddenly had an attack of nerves. I foresaw that he would answer me, and that he would refuse; and that after refusing I should never get the obstinate fellow to reconsider his determination. It was practically staking all my chances on a single throw of the dice, whereas I ought to have brought all my forces into action at the same moment.

So I dashed off another letter to Percy Cudden, and told him the story—or as much of it as I thought good for him. ‘You must go over to his shop,’ I wrote, ‘and talk him over. If you can’t manage it by yourself, perhaps you could get Elsie to speak up for us.’ I pointed out, with simple cunning, that this was a crisis in Jonny’s life: if he missed this he would never have another opportunity. We just had to do all we could to bring him round.

Percy, I knew, would do his best. A thoroughly good chap, without an ounce of selfishness in his composition, he would be as keen as I was, or very nearly. As for Elsie, frankly I did not know in the least what line she would be likely to adopt in the matter. Elsie was an incalculable factor to me, almost every time. But she was one more string, and I considered I could trust Percy to pull it in the right direction, if he thought it necessary and fitting. And then there was one more point: I had been a fool to write off on my own like that without letting him have any sort of official notice. Some one in authority at Mike’s ought to communicate with him as well. Wilks, of course, since he was acting as treasurer of the fund, and had been in the plot apparently from the start.

I am ashamed to say I funked going to see Wilks. I did not know how he would be likely to receive me

after seeing me back to college in my too hilarious condition the night before. So I wrote him a letter too, and got Mrs. Perrott to take it round to his rooms. Perhaps it was the wisest thing to do. I had always been better at writing than at speech: my infernal shyness did not get in my way and trip me up when I had a pen in my hand and was sitting in my own room alone.

I was so exhausted after all this writing that I then went fast asleep in my chair, and did not wake up until half-past seven, when chapel and hall were both well over. I had to dig out a loaf of bread and the remains of an old cheese to keep myself going till the next morning.

And then there was nothing to be done but sit down and wait, wondering all the time if I had spoiled the whole thing. I ought to have got an exeat and gone down and seen them all. A few words with Percy, and he would have suggested some way out of the difficulty. He had ingenuity enough for a dozen, whereas I was certain to make a hash of anything I undertook on my own.

It was a Friday, too, which meant that I had to wait at least two whole days before I could hear from either of them. I pictured them getting my letters. Percy would probably lose no time: he could be trusted to get to work on the Saturday, when he was generally free. He might get over to Leicester and spend the afternoon there: on the other hand, it was quite likely that he had some arrangement with the two ladies at Ashe which he would not care to break through. Well, at the worst he could manage Sunday. I calculated the chances over and over again during the next two days.

And, in fact, I heard nothing whatsoever until late on Monday evening, when a telegram was brought up to me just as I was getting ready to go down to

chapel. I tore it open, and read it as I hurried down the stairs and across the court. It ran :

All serene am coming up tomorrow afternoon Cudden.

It seemed to me that I breathed freely for the first time during the last three days.

Chapter IV

The Succession of a Baronet

I

PERCY CUDDEN blew into my room (we did not say 'blew in' during my Cambridge days, but the expression is so eminently suitable that I positively must use it here) just as Mrs. Perrott, admirable woman, was laying my table for a modest luncheon. He came in, that is to say, like a healthy and invigorating breeze, cheerful and ruddy as ever, his flaming hair set off by a corduroy waistcoat (we were just beginning to wear corduroy waistcoats then) of a kind of shimmering green, ornamented with pearl buttons. I forget what tie he wore, but you may be certain it was of some colour that contrasted forcibly with other portions of his attire. Percy liked violent contrasts of colour.

I had seldom been so pleased to see any one. On the whole I liked Percy Cudden better than any one I knew—better even than Jonny, in a way. He was so much more expansive, so much easier to get on with. There was, and always had been, something rather hard about the other : one felt that he not only had a conscience, but was seriously thinking of ordering his life by it. I could see Jonny, some day, having the very devil of a time with this conscience of his, whereas it was difficult to imagine Percy Cudden having the devil of a time with anything. He looked like a young man on whom the sun had always taken

care to shine. And, of course, during the early stages of his engagement to Elsie he was even more aggressively cheerful than usual.

I can still see him, carelessly throwing his hat and stick on the sofa by the window, and coming round to the fire with outstretched hand.

‘Jolly little crib, eh? I say, old man, that was great about Jonny. Wonderful. I went over there as soon as I possibly could. But it was a bit awkward. You see, I’d arranged——’

‘I was afraid something of the sort would happen. But it’s jolly seeing you. And I knew you’d get there as soon as ever you could manage it. How did you manage? Was he very stiff?’

Percy rubbed his hands, chuckling. ‘Stiff as blazes. I tell you, my boy, I had the job of my life. It was only owing to that landlord of his, the hunch-back fellow——’

‘Herrick, you mean.’

‘Herrick? Yes, that’s the fellow. I tell you, Herrick’s a caution. Didn’t know there was such a chap, in these degenerate days. He looks on cricket as a sort of religion, it seems to me. And then there’s a daughter.’

‘Oh, did the daughter weigh in too?’

‘Yes! Rather. And had a good deal to say in the matter too. You see, Jonny’s got a bit serious lately. Seems to me he’s thinking all the time about whether he hasn’t got into a wrong station, or some rot of that sort. Thought Cambridge would be no use to him at all: only unsettle him, and so on. However, as I say, I put the case before old Herrick, who seemed a reasonable chap, and he spoke up like a good ’un. I shouldn’t be surprised if your friend Burnett had been at him.’

‘I expect he has.’

‘Well, it really was rather comic. There was old

Jonny, looking as obstinate as you please—you know that look he gets when he thinks he's made up his mind—and these two arguing for all they were worth. All in terms of cricket, that was the funny thing about it. I mean to say, they pointed out that it was unpatriotic. At Cambridge he would have a much better chance of becoming an England player. It would put the polish on him, so to speak. That was the old man's point of view; and then the girl would hint that it wasn't quite playing the game to turn the show down after all you had done, and the Canon, and this scholarship founded in his honour, and so forth. I say, what was the whole story about it, anyhow?'

I embarked upon it while we sat down to lunch. That was the jolliest meal I had eaten since I went up. It was fine to see Percy sitting there, radiating health and contentment, every now and then breaking into a low chuckle of laughter at some ingenious thought.

'Did you bring Elsie in at all?' I asked at last.

He nodded his head. 'Oh yes; she came in at the finish. They just sapped the defences, those two Herricks, and then she supplied the finishing touch. I got him to come back with me to Ashe on the Sunday afternoon. Her idea. Of course, I had talked it all over with her before I went, and we arranged I was to bring him out. I say, by the way, Mooney's been seedy again.'

'Has she? I've not heard anything about it.'

'Well, she has; she was lying up all that Sunday. I say, you know, Elsie is a wonder. The way she managed Jonny that afternoon was wonderful.' And Percy heaved a sigh and sat for a minute or so without speaking, his mind no doubt concentrated on Ashe cottage.

'I expect she is,' I interposed drily. 'But I'm sorry about poor Mooney.'

‘Eh? Oh, Mooney. Yes, good old thing, Mooney. Lord! I wish sometimes we were back in the old days at the rectory.’

‘Before the serpent came into Eden,’ I suggested.

He laughed. ‘The serpent! That fellow Hicks, eh? Not bad. Wonder what’s happened to him now.’

I said I didn’t mind if I never saw him again, and I thought Jonny was of the same opinion.

‘You bet he is. Jonny fairly hated him. Between ourselves, I believe he’d caught him doing something or other. Some girl in the village.’

‘Very likely.’

‘I wonder if he’s coming up to Cambridge too.’

I shrugged my shoulders. Cambridge was a large place. So long as he didn’t come to Mike’s there was no real reason why we should ever meet.

‘I rather like the look of this place,’ said Percy, getting up and looking out of the window on to the big elm trees that ornamented the court over by the chapel. He sighed.

‘I wish to goodness you were coming up too,’ I said. ‘Why on earth can’t you? Come up with Jonny next summer term. Don’t you remember when we were all coming up together?’

‘By Jove I do.’

And as he spoke I could smell the very scent of the meadows in front of the drawing-room window at Ashe. A summer evening, with the clack of the mowing machine as they cut the hay in the Long Meadow, and the occasional harsh note of a corn-crake somewhere down below the cricket pitch in front of us. We used to sit there by the hour in the evenings before Hicks came to split up and spoil everything; and to that accompaniment we used to talk over what we were going to do when we reached the present goal of our ambitions—Cambridge and St. Michael’s famous and ancient college.

‘ You know,’ he went on reflectively, ‘ I believe the place would do me a lot of good. Pity they insisted on me going into the business at once. Truth is, old man, I want a little of this. I feel it sometimes, with—your sister. I’m not quite in her class, you know. I could do with a bit of polish.’

And he reddened a little, turning it off with a half laugh. The ingenuous Percy !

Of course I said ‘ Nonsense ! ’ as promptly as possible. But equally of course it was true enough, and rather pathetic to hear him saying so.

‘ You say that just because you happen to be in love,’ I went on. ‘ All the same, I do wish you would come up.’

He shook his head.

‘ Impossible, I’m afraid. You see, they’ve just found out at home that I’m invaluable in the business. I really am rather useful, you know. I think of things that don’t seem to strike the others. But what fun we should have had, we three together up here ! ’

He stood looking out on the big east window of chapel, the tracery of which glimmered through the bare trees.

‘ I suppose money has its points,’ he said at last. ‘ But one loses a lot by beginning too early. They want me to go and travel abroad for six months or so now, to see how they manage out there, and to whip up a few new customers. I suppose I must, but naturally I don’t want to in the least just now.’

‘ One of these days you’ll be a millionaire.’

He gave an impatient jerk of the head.

‘ I’d rather almost be anything else. I mean to say, one must have a certain amount of money, of course, for Elsie’s sake. But there are such a lot of other things I want to do. Fancy being head of a stocking factory all my life ! I tell you, sometimes I feel inclined to cut loose altogether and live my own

life. But there's the family. One gets tied down, and never thinks of untying the knot till it's too late. May turn it into a limited company when they're all dead, I suppose.'

I regarded Percy Cudden with some surprise, for I had never heard him talk like this before. The virus of love, working through his system, had produced this outburst of discontent, I supposed. He wanted Romance, and here he was, tied to his weaving machines. And on the other side, there was Jonny, anxious to cut the romantic element out of his life and stick to the manufacture of bicycles. At least, that was what it looked like.

'Well, there it is,' Percy concluded, balancing his hat adroitly on the end of his stick. 'I must get back to Fleckney, I suppose. Going down to the river? Well, I'll walk down a bit of the way with you. I'm going to Ashe to-morrow, I expect. Got to say good-bye.'

'What! You're not really going immediately?'

'Wish I wasn't. They want me to get off next week some time.'

'Not for six months though, is it?'

'Well, perhaps not six. But it'll feel like a year or more to me. I say, old man, you'll look after Elsie while I'm out there. I mean to say—of course you will, anyway, but I've a sort of feeling——'

He did not seem able to explain what the feeling was, so I expressed my readiness to assist. We walked on for some time in silence.

'She'll be all right,' I said helpfully.

'Oh, you brothers! Well, let's hope so. Look here, old chap, I must leave you here. All I meant to say was—you might perhaps say a word now and then. Oh, well, never mind.'

He waved his hand, turned back abruptly towards the railway station, and was gone.

I went on down to the boat-house, musing over the Percy Cudden of old days and his successor to-day. There was a decidedly new note about him since his engagement. In the old days he never had these yearnings for a higher life. Stocking-weaving was good enough for him then, so long as it brought in the shekels. And now he burned to make a name, I suppose, to please my sister, who probably (as I said to myself with all a brother's injustice) desired nothing but the personal comfort of an assured income. No ! perhaps she had some desires beyond that, but I imagined they were more concerned with her own personal glory than with his. Curious, though, how in some indefinable manner she had the faculty of arousing this sort of ambition in the minds of every other male she met. I had no doubt she had used it with Jonny over this business of coming up to Cambridge.

These women ! Unconsciously, as it seemed to me, they supplied the motive power of the universe, spurring us on to all sorts of undertakings, noble or grotesque, that we did not in the least wish to do, and that probably they did not in the least wish us to do. But we imagined they did, and that was enough. What a ridiculous piece of machinery with which to move the world !

II

As I steered the second College Trial down the muddy Cam that afternoon, easying every now and then to listen to old Kirwan, who was coaching us from the tow-path, I had plenty of leisure for reflection. I must, in fact, have fallen into a sort of waking dream, for down below the railway bridge I very nearly ran down the president of the C.U.B.C., who was practising for the Colquhoun Sculls. There was a brief interchange of polite language between the great

man and our coach, ending with a warning that we should be fined a guinea.

Kirwan, however, was so annoyed at the way in which he had been addressed that he quite omitted to pass the compliments on to me. That he, a Trials man, who had got his cap when this upstart president was still a freshman, should be pulled up and upbraided on the tow-path like that was a bit too much. For Kirwan was one of those gentlemen who get the rowing bacillus well into their blood the first year they come up, and think of nothing but their college crews for the rest of their time at the University. He had taken his degree two years ago, but still stayed up for the pleasure of coaching a boat or two now and then, and because he had an insignificant post as demonstrator to some scientific lecturer. Kirwan of Mike's was quite a character at Cambridge by that time. He was supposed to possess the secret of getting a crew of freshers together in quicker time than any other coach on the river. And certainly he had a wonderful flow of language.

But, as I say, that afternoon found me in a dreamy mood. I was oppressed, too, with a feeling that something was wrong—that indefinable sensation of uneasiness that sends one exploring in search of some reason. So far as I knew, nothing untoward had happened or was likely to happen, except that Percy Cudden was going to Germany, and that was not anything to worry about unduly. Very likely Germany would do him good: travel of any kind might serve to tone him down a little—and, much as I loved Percy, I could see that a little toning down would do him no harm.

'*Easy, Cox,*' came in an angry roar from the bank, suddenly disturbing my meditations. And this time Kirwan did get to work. What in hell did I think I was doing this time? Was it not enough that I had

got the club fined for nearly running down the president of the C.U.B.C. engaged on his lawful avocations (at least it must be presumed that the president could practise for the Colquhoun Sculls if he liked, even though he had about as much chance of getting them as a lop-eared rabbit), but must I also interfere with the Third Trinity light four engaged in practising for the championship of the river, and which they really had some little chance of winning? Kirwan had a way of talking for the benefit of chance listeners as well as the boat he happened to be coaching at the time. Would I kindly keep my eyes open and not go fast asleep? All of which, of course, was most unfair, considering that he ought to have been on the look-out for these apparitions himself. It was not part of my business to easy the boat without orders.

But I was a meek youth, and so were we all in Kirwan's hands. We sat and shivered in the cold breeze, drifting down the sluggish stream, while he stormed and gesticulated on the bank, working himself up into no end of a passion about nothing. For, after all, what was the second College Trial? A mere nursing house for the Lent boats of next term, and the Lent races, as no doubt you are aware, are no very great shakes, being nothing but fixed-seat rowing for the junior crews. But Kirwan, whatever his faults, had the virtue of thoroughness. His trial might not be much to look at in itself, but it would furnish a man or two for the third and fourth boats in the Lents, and from these in their turn would be selected the Mike's First Boat of the future, which was going to be, some day, when his patient efforts had begun to have their effect, at least two places higher in the first division. At present we were sixth. In my father's time we had been head for two years. But then in my father's time rowing was not organised as it was now.

Kirwan and I became friends later, but at that time, of course, I was far too shy to say anything to him even when he showed signs of taking an interest in my affairs. When I officiated as cox of the third boat in the next Lents, I saw a lot of him. The enthusiasm of the man was wonderful. He took as much trouble over that wretched little lot of freshers as though we had been the 'Varsity Eight itself. We used to be invited up to his rooms every evening after hall for an orange and one glass of wine when we were in training. And he could get his crews along. That third boat made a bump each of the first three nights of the races, and only failed on the last because Pembroke II., who were just in front of us, ran into Sidney before we could catch them. Which would have meant the crew getting their oars, as trophies to hang up afterwards in their rooms, where no doubt they would have become an infernal nuisance. I remember Kirwan telling us that he had been into the rooms of some blood at the Hall, who had no fewer than six oars slung along his walls. And there was another friend of his who had gone down now and lived in rooms in the Temple: he had got over the difficulty of disposing of these cumbrous ornaments by cutting off all the blades and arranging them in a sort of fan-like trophy in front of the fireplace.

We got down to Baitsbite at last, without further disaster, and turned, and did a row over the course, Kirwan trotting by our side along the tow-path the whole way, which must have been excellent exercise for him. We did not hear much of his voice after turning Ditton Corner, and it was perhaps as well that he had instructed me to easy at the railway bridge, for I don't suppose he had much breath left by that time. But he recovered by degrees, and found plenty to say before we paddled on home by easy stages in the

growing dusk. I must say I used to enjoy those afternoons on the river. Ugly old ditch as it is, especially in those reaches over which the racing takes place, I always had an affection for the Cam. I should have liked to row myself, to be enrolled among those fine, stalwart fellows in very exiguous shorts and bright-coloured socks and blazers, who did the hard work and reaped the glory—or occasionally the shame. For even the best of us get bumped sometimes. But it was hopeless for me to attempt anything of that sort. I weighed under eight stone in those days, though I was beginning to grow. It was much that I was permitted to become a hanger-on. In the old days the steersman had been a man of importance in the crew: generally he was their coach as well as their pilot. Even now, as Kirwan reminded me on occasion, the fortunes of the boat often depended on him more than on any of the oars. If, for example, I happened to get the rudder-lines crossed at the starting-point, or, worse still, get them entangled with the chain I had to hold while we were waiting for the gun to go off—why! then it was at least ten to one that we were bumped that time.

A cheerful thing to dream about at nights!

But those eights were companionable affairs. Shy as I always was, it was impossible to be with eight men through a whole period of training without becoming tolerably intimate with some of them. Of course, they were rather too extravagantly healthy after a time: they were a little apt to be hard on furniture: a certain amount of 'ragging' was inevitable. But the majority of crews with which I had anything to do were good fellows, and the coaches saw to it that they did not overdo their horseplay, and also that they went to bed in good time.

I think Kirwan had some idea that I might scrape into fame as cox to the next 'Varsity Eight, after

Tyndale had gone down. Even that would be an accession of glory to Mike's, in a way. A cox was nothing much to brag about, but it was better than nothing.

'You're the lightest man we've got,' he said to me one day. 'We shall want you to cox the first boat in the Mays.'

But that was a point on which I had made up my mind. I was going to play cricket in the summer, whatever happened. And especially now that Jonny was coming up.

You should have heard the scorn of Kirwan when I said this. In his eyes the boats were everything. If by any ill fortune the Mike's first boat had dropped out of the first division, I believe Kirwan would have pined away and died. Good God, man, what did I think I was going to do in cricket? On the river it was possible I might be some use, seeing that an inscrutable Providence had allowed me to be born with the physique of a gnat, or midge; and that gnats, or midges, with sufficient strength to pull rudder strings were somewhat scarce in this University. But at cricket! He did not say anything about my lameness, of course, but I couldn't help seeing his eyes wander down to my left foot.

I was still a little lame, it was true, but the limp was barely noticeable.

The captain of the Mike's Eleven, however, backed me up. He happened to be rowing that term, having nothing else to do. And I expect Burnett had been talking to him.

'That's right,' he said. 'Don't you waste all the summer tearing your guts out on the river. I heard you could keep wicket a bit. We shall want some one for that job next season.'

III

On my way back to my rooms that afternoon, I chanced to meet a newspaper boy just outside our porter's lodge. Now in those days I had not got the paper-reading habit at all. Strange to say, I could get along perfectly well without knowing what the rest of the world was doing, or rather what the papers thought it was going to do. I occasionally saw a morning paper at the Union (which I had joined after much mental debate), but an evening paper was a decided rarity. If the newsboy had not practically forced one into my hand, I should certainly never have thought of buying one of my own initiative. However, it came into my mind that it would be rather amusing to look through while I was having tea up in my rooms. I found a penny, bought the rag, and took it upstairs with me.

I did not see it until I was well through with my tea. Indeed, they had not given the paragraph a place of honour or anything of that kind. It did not rank as an important piece of news. I think it was tucked away in a corner somewhere, under some such heading as 'Sudden Death of a Baronet.' I read, incurious, until the name suddenly roused me. The baronet in question was none other than Sir Spencer Washington Hicks, second holder of the title, who had passed away on board his yacht *Argonaut* while cruising in the Mediterranean, with great suddenness. The body of the deceased baronet would be brought back to his native country for interment. He was succeeded in the title by his only son, Reginald Spencer Washington Hicks, now an undergraduate at Cambridge.

Reggie Hicks an undergraduate at Cambridge! And I had not the least idea of it. Where was he, I wondered, and why had I never come across him

walking along the K.P. or down by the boat-houses. But no ! he would not be likely to go down there. I did not see Reggie Hicks taking any personal interest in the arduous toil demanded by the river and its votaries. I wondered where I should discover him, in the end. One of these days I was bound to run across him. Cambridge was not so large a place as all that. Unless, perhaps, he had gone to Downing or some out-of-the-way place like that, where a man might lie hid for the whole of his three years if he wanted to do so.

Not that Reggie Hicks was the sort of man who would try to hide his light under a bushel. No ! it was rather I who would be anxious to avoid him. I did not want ever to see the fellow again.

And he had succeeded to the title !

Somehow or other I felt at the back of everything that this was the cloud that had been hanging over me all day since Percy Cudden had turned off at Sidney Street to go up to the railway station. I thought I had got rid of that fellow, and here he was, pursuing us as it were, and with Jonny coming up as well by Easter time. No wonder I had felt as though some disaster were imminent.

IV

There was no doubt that Miss Mooney was ill now. When I went down to Ashe for the Christmas vacation, it was impossible to help noticing the change. She was beginning to get decidedly vague in her manner, and her memory was weak. They all noticed it in the village.

Nicholas Harrison, I think, was one of the first to speak to me about it. He said outright that the poor old lady was 'breaking up.' He thought Miss Elsie ought to be looking out for some other old lady to live with.

'Or maybe she 'll find some one to take her fancy,' he said. Meaning, I suppose, that she might marry some one. He (and all the rest of the village for that matter) had no doubt at all that Miss Elsie could at any moment lean over from her balcony, so to speak, and beckon to any young male thing within sight. She had only to indicate her preference, and the matter was finished.

'I rather hope she will, Harrison,' I said, with half a sigh. For I did not want any more responsibility. And what on earth was I to do with her, and the cottage, and all these various young men, supposing poor Miss Mooney did take it into her head to leave us?

And then the new clergyman ran across me in the Fleckney road, beyond the forge, as I was taking a morning stroll, and gave his opinion. Ashe being a college living, as I have said before, Kelway was an old Mike's man too. In fact he had been fellow and one of the classical lecturers some ten years before: then he had been ordained and gone to some curacy in the East End of London, where he was said to have worked with great success and made himself extraordinarily popular with the dockers. He was tall and thin and extremely ascetic in appearance: so far as I knew him, I rather liked him. He was lonely up in the big rectory, and used to ask me to drop in any evening that I could spare, or any afternoon for that matter, and have a game of chess. We were not a bad match at that game.

He took me by the arm, and we walked together towards the railway bridge, for he was going to visit one of the old women in the row of cottages on the right.

'Ah, Strange,' he began at once, 'I'm glad you've come down. I've been a little anxious about Miss Mooney.'

'I know. I'm rather anxious about her myself.'

‘ You see, I don’t like to think of what might happen.’ Kelway became volubly explanatory. ‘ Supposing she died suddenly, and it looks to me as though she might have a stroke of some sort any day, it might be extremely awkward for your—for Miss Strange—all alone in that house.’

‘ There is a servant.’ I ventured a protest.

‘ One servant. Yes, but so young I’m afraid she would be more of a hindrance than a help. You see, if I were a married man it would be different. I could ask her to come and stay with us at the rectory. As it is, my hands would be tied.’ He made an expressive gesture. ‘ And frankly, my dear Strange, I should hate to think of her faced with a situation like that.’

‘ Oh, I expect she would manage all right,’ I said. Not exactly meaning it, but partly from a feeling of shyness in discussing so intimate a matter.

And for a fleeting moment Kelway looked at me as though I were a blasphemer of the deepest dye. I caught his expression and hastened to amend my statement.

‘ I mean to say, I should come up, I suppose, and see her through. Get an exeat for the funeral.’

It took some little time before he was sufficiently recovered to say anything.

‘ Of course, yes, you would naturally do that. But I wonder whether you quite realise how extraordinarily sensitive your—er—sister’s mind is. Should anything of the sort happen, and I sincerely trust it may not, I hope she will not be allowed to remain alone in that cottage. I assure you I feel very strongly on that point.’

I could quite believe it, for he had become quite red in the face.

So that was another of them, I said to myself cynically. Elsie had already captured this ascetic parson, as she had captured the others, and no doubt he was

already wondering whether he should not step in at once, before the expected catastrophe happened, and instal her safely in her old home, probably with Miss Mooney in attendance, until it should please Heaven to permit that lady to pass gently to another sphere. Yes ! he was clearly one of the band. They bid fair, in time, to be as numerous as the suitors of Penelope.

And the village saw it too. No doubt old Nicholas Harrison had it in his mind when he had said that about finding some one to 'take her fancy.' They all saw her now returning to the rectory. Was it not the natural thing to do, after being connected with it for so many years, and after singing at so many concerts ? John Arnold, the bearded carpenter, spoke of it outright when I met him in the street and stopped to have a few words.

'Miss Elsie quite well ?' he asked. And then, when I had reassured him, 'They do say she 'll stay in the parish now, very like. We thought we were going to lose her when the Canon died.'

'Oh ! I hope she 'll stay on here some time yet,' I fenced, knowing pretty well what he meant.

'Some of 'em hope she 'll settle down 'ere, like,' old John went on, and added reminiscently, 'She 's a wonder when we 'ave them concerts in the Parish 'All.'

Under Kelway, Clarke's barn had now become the Parish Hall, and a carved stone had been inserted in the wall over the entrance, setting forth that 'This Hall was Founded by Canon Strange, Rector of this Parish,' and the date. I could see my father's quiet smile, if he knew of this. No doubt he knew : no doubt in his present home he had already commented on the way in which praise and blame are apportioned in this world. For, if we all had our rights, unquestionably the name of Percy Cudden, Owner of Stocking Factories in Fleckney, should have figured on that stone.

We had one of our Christmas concerts during that

vacation. I wrote to Percy, out in Stuttgart or some such place, to tell him about it, and to add how much better it would have been if he had been back to help. So it would : we wanted Percy badly to infuse a little enthusiasm into the business. I did what I could, but I had never pretended to have anything approaching his drive and go. That concert, the last concert I was to see at Ashe, was nothing like the entertainments we had put on in my father's time. Kelway, of course, had not the friends in the neighbourhood that we had. Bob Sterndale came over, it is true, at our invitation, and gave a couple of comic songs ; but he and Elsie had to do the whole thing between them. There were no other stars to compete with them for the applause of the crowd. And I must say Elsie was quite at her best that night. She came on at the end and gave a recitation, Bob doing a sort of piano accompaniment (soft pedal well down all the time), and turning his head round to watch while he played. Curious, the way certain scenes in one's life persist in the memory, standing out distinctly in comparison with others that were perhaps far more important in our minds at the time of their happening. I can see that picture now as clearly as though it had taken place yesterday—Elsie standing there and playing upon the feelings of her simple audience, the front row watching her with all their eyes, mouths slightly agape, Bob Sterndale at the piano, lightly touching a chord now and then, with his head turned so that he too could watch the enchantress over his left shoulder, and, last of all, Kelway's gaunt, ascetic face as he sat at the end of the front row, waiting to get up and make the next announcement on the programme. Kelway was disturbed, clearly—just as Jonny Waring had been disturbed years before—because young Sterndale seemed to be sharing the glory of the evening (such as it was) with Elsie. Thus does history repeat itself.

Miss Mooney was not present that evening, for she really was no longer fit to go out at night, and it was pretty cold just then. We all went up to the rectory after the show was over, quite like old times, and had some supper. There was Elsie, sitting at the end of the table (she was the only woman there) and playing up to those two exactly as she used to when Reggie Hicks and Jonny and Cudden had been at the table. Either of them might have been excused for thinking that she regarded him as the chief figure there, that she was trying to please him and him alone. I have never met Elsie's equal at producing this useful impression.

As we walked down to the cottage afterwards I happened to say something about wishing Percy had been there. She came out of a brown study to reply.

'Percy? What Percy do you mean?'

'Have you forgotten him already? You had a letter from Germany this morning.'

She gave a little laugh, but I could see she was annoyed at having been caught dreaming.

'Poor old Percy,' she said meditatively. 'I'd forgotten all about him, for the moment.'

'So I imagined,' I said, rather drily. Upon which she got rather annoyed, and told me not to be a little fool. We walked the rest of the way home in silence.

Chapter V

An Old Friend Drops Out

I

It is one of the advantages of a retiring disposition that one does not make friends too quickly. One should proceed with a due caution in this most important of occupations. A false step or two at the start may not necessarily be fatal, but it is pretty sure to lead to a long series of annoyances. Life is a voyage: an

excursion through this sphere, let us suppose, on our way towards another ; and most of us know the danger of too free a habit of conversation in the early stages of a journey that is at all likely to be prolonged. We make acquaintances who cling to us and scare off others ; or we find that we have incautiously confided secrets to ears unworthy to receive them. A terrible punishment for the trustful, to see his former friends moving about in the throng, their faces alight with sinister malevolence, and to know that they are only waiting an opportunity to betray former confidences, and to smirch them in the telling !

Above all things, let us avoid an unnecessary expansiveness !

And yet, of course, there are two sides to this counsel. My friend Percy Cudden thought differently, and I do not know that he was any the less fortunate in his friendships on that account. But then Percy was one of those gallant fellows who go through life as though it were a pageant. A mistake or so might be made, but what matter ? It could be remedied, or forgotten. A bit of a swashbuckler was our stocking-weaver. I have often wondered what sort of figure he would have cut, say, in the spacious days of Drake or Raleigh.

To myself, looking back across the years, it seems that I must have been excessively timorous in those early days at Cambridge. Yet I progressed, better than might have been expected. I take it I was fortunate in many things. For one, I had been quartered in staircase Q, New Court, where that admirable woman, Mrs. Perrott, reigned supreme. There was very seldom any serious trouble on her staircase : for some reason or other she always contrived that her young gentlemen should not be of the kind that too easily excites the animosity of young companions. (There was Germain, it is true, who had been suspected of

holding prayer meetings in his room, but then there was also his friend Fagge, the Rugby football player, on the same staircase.) Besides, Germain was, if possible, even more retiring in disposition than myself.

I think the men at Mike's at that time must have been a rather decent lot, on the whole. They did not break up so much into distinct (and sometimes hostile) sets as they were apt to do at some of the larger colleges. Most of us took up some sort of athletic recreation. We had two scholars rowing in the first boat, and another acting as secretary of the cricket club (a very useful bat, too, in a quiet way), and yet another captain of the lawn-tennis six. At some colleges you used to find a certain amount of friction between the various clubs. The rowing men, for instance, would hardly admit that footballers or cricketers did anything for the glory of the college—anything at least that could compare with the gallant efforts of the various crews—while all players of games or votaries of athletics united in despising those who did nothing but sit up in their rooms and read—except when they went for a Sunday constitutional to Madingley.

By the time that Jonny Waring turned up at Mike's I had actually made, much to my own surprise, a sort of position for myself. I had coxed a College Trial, and the third boat in the Lents, and got to know Kirwan and a good many other rowing men as well. I admit they ragged me a little when I announced my intention of playing cricket in the summer, but then I never looked like a cricketer. But that was only at first. Somehow or other it spread gradually through Mike's that I was a bit of a 'surprise packet,' that the great Burnett had spoken favourably of me, and Bazalgette, last year's captain, to say nothing of our excellent Senior Tutor. Also most of them got to know, in a vague sort of way, that young Waring, of Leicester-

shire, had got a scholarship, and that I was in a sense connected with him.

‘Wilks says our Midge is to be retained for the exclusive use of the cricket team,’ said Kirwan one evening towards the end of the Lent races. He always called me by that name after I refused to cox the May boat. ‘He is, it seems, a wicket-keeper. How do you do it, Midge? Let’s try him with a few oranges.’

And the boat proceeded to pelt me with oranges from the table (we were having our usual dessert up in Kirwan’s rooms) until the coach called a halt.

‘That’ll do, boys. Easy all. I vote we all go down to the ground and cheer first time he plays for the team. You’ve a better eye than I expected, Midge, all the same. Didn’t drop more than half of them—at a modest computation.’

Kirwan did his best to pump me about the newcomer before he arrived.

‘They tell me you know something of this fellow Waring,’ he said. ‘What sort of a chap is he?’

I said he was my oldest friend, and that we had been practically brought up in the same house. With the idea that we should come up to Mike’s together. But I was very guarded: I did not want to give too much away.

‘There was something in the papers about his being the son of the old Leicestershire pro. I recollect a chap called Waring—a fast bowler.’

Kirwan knew too much altogether. But I was not communicative that time. I said he might very possibly be right: it was true at all events that he came from Leicestershire. At which the great man was much amused.

‘My dear Midge, you seem to regard me as dangerous. I assure you I have no intention of hurting your friend. Is he a fellow of athletic build, suitable for

one of the May boats? That's what I'm really interested in, if you will condescend to answer.'

'I think he'd make a first-class oar—if they'll allow him to row. But I understand he may be required to bowl for the University.'

I could not help saying this, because I knew it would annoy Kirwan. It did: he broke out into a long harangue on the relative importance of cricket and rowing. Cricket was all very well, as a game: he had nothing to say against the young gentlemen who disported themselves at Fenner's or the college ground in harmless amusement with bat and ball. But we must understand that it was a game, and nothing more. Whereas the College Boats—well! sufficient to say that upon their position on the river the college itself took its rank or status for the current year. Did any one really care how many men any individual college contributed to the cricket eleven that met Oxford at Lord's? Not in the least—any more than how many men Corpus had in the Rugby football fifteen, or Cat's in the chess team. No! the one and only thing that counted was our position on the river. This being so, did I understand that it was my bounden duty to persuade this eccentric friend of mine to come down to the boat-house on the first opportunity and be tubbed. We should want every one we could get in the next May races. Practically we had only three men left out of the last year's boat, and one of them was more than half a crock.

Get Kirwan on his favourite subject, and he would talk away for ever. I let him go on without saying much myself. In my own mind I knew well enough that Jonny would go his own way, whatever I might do or say; and I did not believe that any sane man was going to throw away the practical certainty of a cricket blue for the doubtful honour of representing his college in the first, or possibly the second, May

boat. But I liked Kirwan. I like most men who believe whole-heartedly in one thing. And during my second term, when I was steering that third boat of ours, he seemed to enjoy coming up to my room in the evening and discussing high political affairs in the rowing world.

II

It was strange, when Jonny came up next term, to feel that I was, for once, the elder brother, able to show him about and instruct him as to what things he might do, and what he ought to avoid. We went up together from Ashe, for he had come over to stay with us for a week before term began. I felt that I wanted to get to know him again. This feeling was always coming between Jonny and me : it had come first after the accident at the bridge, when his father was drowned and there had been a long interval before he came back to live with us at the rectory. Then I had felt that it was a new Jonny who returned to my life : now, it seemed to me, he was even more changed. There was nothing of the boy about him at all, now. He might have been six or seven years my senior.

And he was undoubtedly a very handsome man. Those dark blue eyes of his were more striking than ever now that he had grown up and developed. You could not help noticing them, all the more because of his tanned complexion and crisp dark hair. You suddenly caught them when he looked up to answer a question, and they fairly astonished you. Even Elsie remarked upon them.

‘ I had no idea his eyes were so deep a blue as all that,’ she said. ‘ I believe they ’ve got darker during the last year.’

‘ What does Mooney think of him ? ’ I asked.

‘ Poor Mooney ! She ’d actually forgotten who he was. She thought it was Reggie Hicks, of all people,

come over to pay us a formal call. She addressed him as "Sir Reginald"—which made it slightly embarrassing. Especially as I don't think he and Reggie ever quite hit it off together.'

'Mooney's losing her memory,' I said.

And the old lady came in afterwards to explain that of course it was all a silly mistake. She had known him perfectly well as soon as she had seen him, but for some reason or other she had been thinking of Sir Reginald at the moment, and his name slipped out.

'What do you think of him now?' I asked her.

Miss Mooney pursed up her lips with the air of one who knows more than she means to say.

'I think he is much improved,' she admitted. 'Very much improved in every way. But—if I were you, my dear boy, I don't think I should have him here too often, just at present.'

I laughed. 'Well, I don't see that I shall have much opportunity, if we are both going up on Monday next.'

She nodded her head, the grey curls bobbing up and down in front of her ears. She still held to this fashion, which I suppose had been in vogue when she first came to Ashe, about the time I was born.

'I'm so glad, for your sake, that everything has been satisfactorily settled, at last,' she went on. 'And without drawing upon the dear Canon's little stock of money. Much better that he should be independent.'

I had not, of course, told her or any one else about the famous dinner at the Bull, or my subscription. That was a secret of my own.

I derived a good deal of amusement from watching Miss Mooney during these few days. Amusement mingled with a sort of pain, for the old lady was clearly 'breaking up,' to use the phrase they were so fond of in the village. She had got it firmly into her head now that Jonny was destined for great things at Cambridge. Had not the Canon always said so, and

if the Canon did not know, who would? But at the same time that treacherous memory of hers wandered occasionally. She addressed him as 'Sir Reginald' three or four times, pulling herself up sharply afterwards for her absurd forgetfulness. Jonny clearly did not quite like it: any other name would have pleased him better. But it showed (or so I imagined) how Miss Mooney's mind was working.

Jonny would perhaps have minded more had not Elsie been so extraordinarily kind to him just then. She was at her very best during that week before we went into residence at Mike's, and I have hinted before that when Elsie chose to do so she could make herself as charming as any girl in the country. Before Jonny came she was sometimes almost silent through a whole meal, her face without a spark of animation in it, listless and apparently bored almost to tears: now she was a different creature altogether, a statue come to life. She laughed and joked away with him, on a footing of perfect, friendly equality, and I could see Jonny expanding, so to speak, under the influence of her favour like a fruit ripening in the sunshine. She was quite like the Elsie of the old rectory again for a season, recalling the family jokes and mimicking the various visitors who used to look in on us. Then, one day towards the end of our time, she began on Percy Cudden.

Now Percy had one or two little mannerisms that perhaps showed traces of his origin, and she reproduced these in a manner that rather hurt me. For example, Percy had a way of saying 'reelly' instead of 'really,' and, of course, he opened the door for any one and did everything of that sort with just a shade too much *empressement*. And one evening Elsie began on these, taking off Percy as he might have appeared in various ridiculous situations. She was in more than ordinarily high spirits that night, and I quite admit she

was very funny indeed. But I did not like it : to me it seemed like a sort of treachery, and I could not help saying so afterwards. And that was a difficult thing to do, I assure you. I hated saying anything, for I knew so well how she would take it, and yet I felt that I could not sit quiet and allow her to go on without making a protest.

I took the opportunity when we happened to be alone for a moment.

‘I say,’ I began clumsily, ‘I rather wish you wouldn’t say things like that about Percy. It seems hardly fair, when he’s not here.’

‘If he’s away he’s not likely to hear of it,’ she retorted flippantly. ‘I take it for granted that neither of you are likely to let him know.’

‘I don’t think you ought to laugh at him behind his back,’ I went on doggedly. ‘After all, you’re engaged to him, and he thinks more of you than anything in the world.’

I felt as I said this that I was making a mistake. Much better not bring up the subject at all. But this was always happening when Elsie and I began talking about anything at all seriously. There must have been some deep-seated antagonism in our characters. Yes ! I suppose I was serious and something of a prig, and she was all sparkle and change, like a fountain playing in the sunlight. Like a fountain, too, she could turn to ice. I could see a change come over her face as I spoke.

‘In the first place, I’m not engaged to Percy Cudden, and if I were it’s no business of yours to interfere.’

She spoke in a sort of half-joking way, but I could see that underneath she was really angry. I debated for a moment whether I should turn the subject, and decided it would be mere cowardice.

‘At any rate, he thinks you are,’ I said.

‘He thinks nothing of the kind. He’s much too

sensible. He asked me to marry him, and I said I'd think about it if no one better turned up. Do you suppose I'm going to tie myself down before I've seen anything of the world outside Ashe ?'

'It doesn't seem much of a bargain for Percy.'

'It would be a worse one for me. What could I do over in Fleckney, married to a stocking-maker ? It's all very fine for you, going up to Cambridge and the rest of it, but have you ever thought of what it's like to be tied up from the start, and never have a chance to do anything but marry some one who will probably turn out as dull as ditch-water ? Don't make any mistake about it. I shall marry when I'm ready, and not before. And now, have you any further advice, exhortation, or reproof for me ?'

She ended on a note of raillery, which had its usual effect of making me feel obstinate. I cannot explain it, but I could always deal better with her when she showed anger more obviously. To do her justice, she very seldom did. She preferred to treat me as a sort of heavy father, being quite aware that the more she did so the heavier I actually became.

'Does it not strike you that some slight consideration may be due to other people ?' I said the words, but I was deeply conscious of their entire futility. 'It seems to me that you just accept everything you are offered without the smallest idea of giving anything in exchange.'

And then she laughed, quite gaily and naturally, as though we were the best of friends.

'Dear boy ! Why not ? Can I help it if they choose to come and make love to me ? Besides, I rather like some of them. There's something rather delightful about Jonny Waring, for instance. He's much better-looking than poor Percy, and his waistcoats are less violent. But what would you, as they say in France ? Percy has the cash, I suppose.'

She stopped and sighed, her eyes pensively cast down. A pose, of course! She was still by way of amusing herself with me.

'I'm not sure I don't like all of them,' she went on, as I said nothing. 'Even the Wicked Bart. (That's rather a fine name for him, I think.) He had good features, you know. A dear little aquiline nose.' She seemed to muse. 'Good manners, too, when he chose—though he didn't always choose.' A shadow passed across her brow, and at once I was carried back to an evening when we three were sitting in my room in the rectory—I mean, of course, Percy Cudden, Jonny, and myself—and she had suddenly burst in. That was practically the beginning of the end, that night when we had trooped into Hicks's room to demand satisfaction.

'You see,' she explained candidly, 'I naturally want to be nice to all of them. There's Bob Sterndale, too. How jolly to have a husband who can sing a comic song. So cheering in the long winter evenings. Besides, he ought to be quite well off. He's on the Stock Exchange, where they can all make money if they try. Shall I take Bob next time he asks me?'

'I suppose you never think it worth while to be serious for a moment.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Why should I? One serious person in the family ought to be enough—if he's as serious as you are.'

'As you like. I don't suppose it's the slightest use saying anything. But it might make it easier if one had some idea of your intentions. There's Jonny, for instance. I don't want him to go up to Cambridge thinking—well! thinking you like him quite as much as you've been pretending lately.'

Elsie was enjoying herself now thoroughly. She liked me to go stumbling about on dangerous ground while she watched me from safety, somewhere up above.

‘ Dear Jonny ! I ’m not sure he isn’t the best of the lot. He ’s certainly the best looking—except possibly the Bart. And I dare say he might do quite well, in the end. Be a professor, or a great inventor, or something like that. I suppose there is a thrill in being the wife of Darwin, or Edison, or some one of that sort, but I don’t know. Money would be more restful, I think. You see, my dear Rudolf, I have to be practical, with only you and Mooney to help me, and Mooney getting past her best. No ! I ’m afraid Jonny will hardly do—unless he gets there uncommonly quick. And he ’s just a little serious, you know, too. Must have caught it from you, I think.’

She finished in the liveliest spirits.

‘ Jolly to talk these things over, in a friendly way. Look in any time you feel inclined, you know, and ask any questions you like. I wish I was able to give you more of a definite answer, but it is a little embarrassing to a modest girl. If I must make a declaration of my intentions, I can only say that our friend the stocking-weaver holds the field—at present. But if you ask me for how long, I simply cannot say.’

III

And so, at last, we were up at Cambridge together.

That first summer term of ours was very pleasant, to look back upon, but it had its bad moments. At least, they seemed bad moments at the time, though in the retrospect perhaps we made an absurd fuss about them. The fact is, at Cambridge we were still scarcely emerged from the chrysalis. We had not learned to adjust our sense of proportion, and it came as a horrid shock when the authorities did not at once put Waring, the Leicestershire bowler, into the cricket team and play him regularly in all the matches. Some of us—I cheerfully place myself among them—thought

that the world was coming to an end in consequence. Here was a man specially sent up for that purpose by an ex-captain of Cambridge cricket and his friends, backed by Burnett and Bazalgette and a whole crowd of sportsmen who were known to have the welfare of the University at heart, and Magnus, our present captain, refused to have anything to say to him. I do not mean to say that he did not give him a sort of a trial. He gave him a place in the Next Sixteen, which played the First Twelve at the end of May. He could not well help doing as much as that, seeing what Jonny had been doing for the Mike's team.

But the close of May that year was very wet, and a fast bowler might as well have stayed in the pavilion on any one of those three days except the last, when it so happened that Jonny's side were at the wickets. So far as I remember, he only bowled about a dozen overs in the match, and got one wicket—from perhaps the worst ball I had ever seen him send down. Things happen like that sometimes. Batting, of course, was not supposed to be his strong point, and he did not score more than five or six in either innings. And then he was dropped completely.

It really was absurd, because every one agreed that we were uncommonly weak in bowling that year. But Magnus was that kind of man : if he had a suspicion that some one else was trying to interfere with what he considered his business, he would turn rusty at once. And I suppose he had heard all sorts of rumours of this new man at Mike's, and how Burnett thought such a lot of him, and Bazalgette, and the rest of them, and how they had had the impertinence to club together and give the fellow a sort of bastard scholarship so that he could come up in the summer term and help the University to win the great match of the year. Well ! put like that, no doubt it did sound rather as though they were trying to force his (the captain's) hand, and

he would soon show them that he was the last man to allow such a thing to be done.

Every one expected that Jonny would be included in the Freshmen's Match, which was one of the first events of the season. But his name was not down. Magnus, I believe, said afterwards that he had no official knowledge that Waring had come into residence. This trial, for the Next Sixteen, was absolutely the only chance Jonny was given that year. And on our ground he was practically unplayable all through the season. I think Mike's won every one of its matches.

And naturally this gave our old friend Kirwan his opportunity. I need hardly say that Kirwan had run an appraising eye over the new recruit the moment he arrived. This was the very type of fellow he wanted for the May races. What a seven he would make—and we wanted a seven badly for the first boat that year. We had Maitland, who made a good lively stroke, but was known to be a bit weak: it was necessary we should get a strong, wiry seven to take as much of the work as possible off his shoulders. Kirwan used to come up to my rooms in the evening and explain all this to me at great length. He always liked to hear the sound of his own voice, and especially when it was on the subject of rowing.

'My good Midge,' he said, 'I take some credit to myself that I made no attempt to get hold of this paragon of yours as long as there was a chance that he might be wanted for hurling a leather ball at the Oxford men in a month's time or so. But as they tell me, on excellent authority, that the man hasn't a dog's chance of being wanted, I say, for Heaven's sake let us seize the opportunity a merciful Providence has sent us, and get him for the river. I tell you frankly, if we can't find a better seven than Gow, the Mike's first boat will Go Down. I've done my best: I've tried every single son of a gun who displayed the slightest ability,

but it won't do. We shall have Maitland creaking up, and the boat all to pieces if this goes on much longer.'

I did not see how on earth a man could play cricket and train for the May races at the same time. And I pointed out that Jonny, in a sense, had been retained as a cricketer : he had come up on that understanding : probably, even if his own patriotic feeling impelled him to consent, his conscience would raise objections. He was a Cricketing Scholar.

But Kirwan was not to be defeated like that. He took up the question of conscience and argued it, not without skill.

'I take it the man was sent up here with the idea of helping us all,' he went on. 'The University first, and then Mike's. Well, let me tell you, young man, I have never seen a fresher who impressed me more favourably than this young Waring of yours. I'm not saying anything of his build from the bowling point of view. He may be able to sling leather balls at stumps or he may not. But he's the very build for an oar. And when I say that, bear in mind that I don't mean an ordinary college oar, either. I don't suppose he weighs more than eleven six, but it's good stuff all through—I can see that. Let your old Uncle Kirwan take him in hand, and next year we will see about it. If he doesn't get a Trials cap at least, young fellow, I'll get mine stewed and eat it for breakfast. There now !'

And indeed he could not well have said much more. When Kirwan spoke (as he very rarely did) of eating his Trials cap, it was understood that his mind could conceive of no greater sacrifice.

'What do you want me to do ?' I asked at last.

'Let me have a talk with him. That's all I want. Bring him round here to-morrow evening, and I'll look in again.'

'Shall I tell him what you've said ?'

Kirwan waved a careless hand, 'Precisely as you

choose, my dear Midge. If he's a decent fellow he'll appreciate what I'm asking him to do without any trouble: if he isn't, nothing will make him see my point.'

'He can't very well give up playing in our matches. He's practically our only bowler.'

'Why should he give up playing in your matches? I tell you, the resources of science are not exhausted. We'd be prepared to let him off occasionally, when there is anything on of real importance. I'm prepared to take that boat out before breakfast if necessary, or after hall. If he doesn't mind the work, I shan't.'

'And what about the rest of the crew?'

Kirwan made an expressive gesture. 'The crew does what I tell them. Don't make any mistake about that, my young friend. But you ought to know: I had you in charge last term.'

IV

That was how it began. Jonny came to my rooms the next evening, and Kirwan looked in after we had been there half an hour or so, according to plan, and proceeded to expound his views once more, in much the same style as with me. And I must say he did it very well, with more tact than I should have expected. It was clear that he must want Jonny in the boat very badly indeed.

I think Jonny liked the look of him. But he took some persuading.

'I've never done any rowing,' he said. 'I know nothing about it.'

'The less you know the better,' Kirwan retorted. 'Learning's easy enough: it's the unlearning that's the difficulty. Let me take you out in a tub once or twice, and I'll guarantee you'll be ready to sit a light

ship by the time the races come on. I can generally tell when a man's the right build for an oar.'

'I don't see how I'm to find the time. We're playing a match, for instance, to-morrow afternoon. Friday as well. You take your men out about the same time, don't you?'

'Are you ready to make a little sacrifice for the sake of the college?'

'Certainly. Anything I can do,' with an emphasis on the 'can.'

'Well, then, so am I. From what I can see of you, I believe I can turn you into a class oar. As I was saying to our young friend Strange the other day, I see no reason why you shouldn't be as useful to the 'Varsity at rowing as you were to have been at cricket. (As you may still be at cricket, I should say.) I quite admit that to me rowing is everything and cricket comparatively nothing. That's just my personal idiosyncrasy. I know something about the one and next to nothing about the other. But I'll tell you what I'm prepared to do, Mr. Waring. If you can get down to the boat-house by ten o'clock to-morrow morning, I'll have one of the boat to take out with you in a tub pair. Then we'll see. Have you got a lecture on to-morrow?'

Jonny considered a moment. 'No, but I've got a lot of work I want to do.'

Kirwan gave a little shrug of the shoulders. 'Of course I know we all ought to be at work in the morning. Still, it's your first term, and I gather you need not really begin hard labour yet. I want to try you out. If I find it's no use, I promise I won't bother you any further. But, looking at you, to turn you into anything else but a rowing man seems absolute flying in the face of Providence.'

Jonny looked up with a little smile. 'All right,' he said. 'I'll come down at ten, if you like.'

And he went down the next morning accordingly, while I was attending a lecture from Wilks on his favourite subject of Latin inscriptions. He looked into my rooms as I was taking my modest luncheon.

‘Well, what luck?’ I asked. ‘What do you think of the old ditch and its inhabitants? But you wouldn’t see many of them as early as all that. How did you get on with Kirwan?’

‘Kirwan? Oh, he’s a good chap. I like Kirwan. He’s one of those men with a single idea. Makes life a delightfully simple matter for them.’

Jonny sat down and poured himself out a glass of beer as I pointed to the tankard.

‘And for you, I suppose, it’s infernally difficult?’

‘Oh! I don’t know. I suppose I’m bound to do what I can, if they ask me. Kirwan seems to want me, and Magnus does not, so that settles it.’

‘That fellow Magnus is the silliest ass who ever put on a pair of pads.’

‘Maybe. Still, he’s given me a chance of doing two things instead of one. I rather like this rowing.’

‘Are you coming up to the cricket ground this afternoon?’

‘Of course I am. Why not?’

And he came up, and took six wickets for about an equal number of runs (out of which I snapped three behind the wickets). Did I tell you I was now regularly keeping for the team—and occasionally knocking up a few runs when they were wanted? I had always rather a habit of coming in when the others failed. I had very little hitting power, but I could watch the ball.

‘I should like to hear what Kirwan thought of you this morning,’ I said.

He laughed. ‘You’ll hear all about it, I expect,’ he said.

And indeed I fully expected Kirwan to come and

discuss the subject after hall. But I had not expected him to be quite so enthusiastic. He had discovered a prodigy. He had known it all the time. A sort of instinct with him, he explained, but if ever there had been a man designed by an all-seeing Providence for the post of seven in the Mike's first boat, it was this fellow Waring. Hadn't he said so at once, before he had ever seen him handle an oar at all? Why, the man had a natural genius for it. I should have seen the way he reached out forward, keeping his hands well up over the stretcher, and got in at once, shoulders, body, and legs all together. Not a mere smack, as the Pelagians did vainly talk (this was Kirwan all over: he drew his illustrations from all available sources), but a good, steady, powerful sweep right through. And his time was perfect—absolutely perfect. That was the only thing he had any doubt about. You can't always tell from a man's build whether he has that sense of rhythm or not.

'Who was out with him?' I asked.

'Eh? Oh, Maitland. I thought I might as well try them together at once.'

'What? You took him out on slides the first day?'

'Never you mind what I did, my young friend. If your Uncle Kirwan (he was fond of referring to himself in this fashion) thinks it necessary, he is quite capable of giving instruction to a novice on the sliding seat. Some men have a slow habit of mind, others a swift.' He got up and began to pace up and down the room, obviously in a state of some excitement. 'I tell you what it is, young man, I have discovered the best man we've had at Mike's since Graham's time.' He brought his hand down on the table with a thump. 'And that's a good five years ago.'

'When are you going to try him in the boat?'

He gave a careless shake of the shoulders. 'He could go in to-morrow. But I'll give him another

tubbing, in case the critics get hold of it. Some of them would go off their head if they heard we were putting in a seven who had only had one hour's practice on slides in his life. That 's the worst of these critics : they have no imagination. And to think they wanted to make a cricketer of this young friend of yours ! Heavens, what a waste ! What luck I happened to take a look at him !'

In my secret heart I wondered whether it was so fortunate as he seemed to think.

'Waring will go in at seven in the first boat on Monday next,' said Kirwan, with all the decision of a coach who knows his own mind and knows also that no one is likely to gainsay his judgment. 'Gow will retire to three, and Nisbet will retire altogether. And a good job too. He was ruining the boat, for all he 's a good plugger. And then we 'll see what we shall see.' And he began to rub his hands in anticipation. I believed Kirwan lived solely for the Mike's boats. The first boat in particular, of course, but the others in due order as well.

I went down to the boat-house to see Jonny's first outing that next Monday, Kirwan, mounted on one of those decrepit animals that were reserved for the especial use of the tow-path, trotting along gently by the side of the newly constituted eight. He was very different from the ordinary Kirwan that day. He purred : you might almost have called him silver-tongued. He had found what he wanted, and everything was for the best in the best of worlds. And really it did seem as though the new seven made a lot of difference to the general rhythm of the boat. Even the ignoramus (and I did not pretend to know much about light ship rowing on slides) could see that this was a livelier combination than that of the week before. The critic of the *Cambridge Review* saw it—and it was generally supposed that anything had to be fairly

prominent before it came to his notice. In the next number he announced that St. Michael's appeared to have shaken off a little of their customary lassitude and, if they continued to progress, might possibly escape being bumped by Lady Margaret. The weekly comments of the *C.R.* for some time before the May races always used to excite Kirwan to a sort of frenzy.

And, as a sober matter of fact, the Mike's first boat went up two places that summer. And Oxford won the cricket match by an innings and ten runs, because we had no one who could get them out, whereupon Burnett and others used the most violent language, saying that Magnus was an obstinate, swollen-headed imbecile, who ought to be taken out and shot against a brick wall. Just what they had known would happen: the very thing they had provided for by getting their new scholar into residence at Mike's that term; and then this fellow would not take the gifts the gods had sent him. Just like his silly conceit! Because he thought they were trying to 'rush' him, or some nonsense of that kind. Even the papers were pretty severe. There might be years when Cambridge bowling was good enough to do without the services of a man of Waring's stamp, but they did not think this was one of them. And so on, and plenty more of the same kind. But I saw little of all these things, even in the press. For I had been hastily summoned home.

It had been arranged for Elsie to come down for the end of that May week. For once in a way she was going to have a holiday in a new sphere—and I expect she would have enjoyed it thoroughly, and was probably looking forward to the outing as much as any of us. As for me, I was divided between intense nervousness at having her on my hands (I was certain to make some sort of ridiculous mistake) and a natural pride at the prospect of being the custodian of such a rarity. For I knew well enough the sort of triumph Elsie

would have reaped at Cambridge. But it was not to be. I had a suspicion that something would happen to prevent her coming all the time. And on the very Wednesday morning when the races began—she was to have come down on Friday—I got a telegram from Ashe.

‘Please come at once,’ was all it said. Elsie was never one to waste words. And I had to go off to Wilks and get an exeat, and pack up a few things and dash off to the station, where I just managed to catch the Leicester train. I got to Ockington at three in the afternoon—just about the time that the races were beginning—and walked to Ashe across the fields, carrying my bag. Mooney, of course, must be ill : I recognised that this would have to come sooner or later. She had not looked likely to last much longer when I had been at Ashe last. And now, presumably, she would die, and I should be left with Elsie on my hands altogether. What on earth was I going to do with her ? What was she likely to do with herself ?

It was a blazing hot afternoon, I remember, when at last I got to the cottage. The solitary servant opened the door to me, her face looking white and scared. Miss Elsie was upstairs. Miss Mooney had been unconscious ever since the morning : she had found her so when she went in with her early cup of tea. Yes, the doctor had been, but said there was nothing to be done : Dr. Macaulay it was, from Misterton, who had attended the family ever since we had been born. A clot of blood on the brain, he said it was. And she might get better or she might not, just as it happened : we should have to wait and see.

Dr. Macaulay was correct in his forecast. We waited—and Miss Mooney passed over into the next sphere just three days later, without having spoken a single word since the servant had found her that morning.

*Chapter VI**Containing a Few Speculations*

I

THE sudden demise of Miss Mooney brought Elsie and myself together for a time more closely than for many years past. For the old lady had been, in a sense, a buffer as well as a shield. It seemed to me that she had always intervened between us—ever since those early days when Jonny Waring had first become one of the household. Once upon a time, even before that, Elsie and I may have made common cause against the enemy of our freedom. But it was difficult to recall those distant years.

While we were waiting for the end, there was nothing much that we could do. There was a competent nurse in attendance, and what was the good of either of us spending much time in the small room where the poor, inert figure lay, breathing stertorously? We went in now and again, as a sort of duty, but we did not pretend that we wanted to stay there very long.

‘I suppose I am heartless,’ Elsie said to me. ‘Sometimes I think I am. I don’t believe I care very much what happens to other people so long as it doesn’t directly affect myself. Of course I shall hate losing Mooney. If I believed it would do her any good, I dare say I might go and sit by her side and hold her hand. But I don’t. And, to tell the truth, I hate looking at her lying there with that pinched look about the nose, snoring away. I never could bear snoring.’

It showed how much Elsie was moved that she should have said so much to me. And to me the still living Mooney was hardly less repugnant. I should have liked to feel more regret, an acuter affection, but these feelings were swamped in discomfort whenever I entered her room. And then I was oppressed with a host of other troubles. What on earth were we going

to do when the end came—if it ever did come? That parson, Kelway, worried me with his sympathy. He was for ever trying to find out what I intended to do. Steps ought to be taken at once, he thought. Could I not advertise for a new companion? Miss Strange certainly ought not to be allowed to stay on in the cottage by herself—or with a single servant.

I am afraid I rather lost my temper with Kelway. He meant well, no doubt, but I did not see (being still young and perhaps rather jealous of interference) why he should come messing about with our private affairs. I said curtly that Elsie was perfectly capable of looking after herself, and would certainly not stay in Ashe if she did not want to do so.

‘I expect myself she will insist on living in some more lively place,’ I said. ‘Probably London.’

The poor parson drew in his breath sharply, almost as though he had received a blow.

‘My dear Strange,’ he expostulated. ‘I am forced to think, sometimes, that you—er—hardly understand your sister’s temperament.’

‘Of course I don’t.’ I confess I laughed openly. The presumption that any one could understand Elsie was sufficiently ridiculous, but that Kelway should think he understood her better than I did was only another proof of the blindness of the Church. I hinted mildly that women were living enigmas, but that when all was said a brother probably saw his sister sometimes when she was off her guard, displaying a trifle more than usual of her true self.

‘This will be a terrible blow to her,’ went on Kelway, the corners of his mouth drooping heavily. ‘She has a remarkably sensitive disposition.’

I kept myself from further laughter by an effort, for I had a sort of kindness for Kelway. But he was rather a nuisance just then, and for a day or two afterwards he took on an air of forgiveness that was dis-

tinctly trying. I spoke to Elsie about it on the night of the funeral.

‘That fellow Kelway is of opinion you ought to get another companion.’

She gave a sort of shiver.

Elsie was all in black, naturally, and she sat in the window-seat of the cottage drawing-room, her face silhouetted against the fading light of the summer evening. I remember I wondered how I could have ever thought her features plain. Or was it that she had somehow improved herself by taking thought. Can women (some women) actually adapt their features, as they can certainly adapt their figures, until they approximate to the ideal they have set before them?

‘I don’t think I can stay here,’ she said suddenly. And then in a different voice, ‘Did he say anything about my not attending the funeral?’

Miss Mooney had been buried that morning, just on the left hand of the gate as you came up the churchyard path from the Willoughby road. In front of the square tower with its tall spire lay her discarded body, and the slabs of clay that had been turned up were almost entirely hidden under a mass of flowers brought by children from the village school. I had been chief mourner. So far as we could discover, Miss Mooney had no relations living, and no personal property of any importance.

‘Is it likely?’ I said, referring to Kelway. ‘He quite recognises what a strain this has all been for you. He thinks you have a remarkably sensitive disposition.’

Elsie made a grimace. Her mood changed, and she sighed.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps I have. But anyway I hate funerals. And I was fond of Mooney.’

We were silent for a few moments.

‘I suppose she was fonder of me than any one,’ Elsie resumed.

‘Of course she was,’ I assented.

And then she burst out rather surprisingly, I thought.

‘What do you really think has happened to her? What happens to all of them—and to us when our turn comes? I wish I knew. I’d give anything to be able to make a guess, even. What do you think, yourself? I suppose you do think about these things, sometimes.’

I was not expecting it in the least.

‘Jonny Waring thinks they are all as much alive as they ever were,’ I said, being a little taken off my guard and not having anything else to say.

‘Does he? I wish I did. I wish he were here now. I suppose you don’t believe that.’

I gave a shrug of the shoulders. ‘I don’t know. It seems hardly likely, does it?’

She shivered. ‘I hate this death. Why can’t we go on the same? It was jolly at the rectory, when father was alive and we were all together.’

I considered. ‘In a way, yes.’ Thinking, of course, of Reggie Hicks.

‘I think I hate change,’ she went on. ‘I don’t in the least want to marry. I’m not going to marry. Why can’t we be simply friends? I say, Rudolf, I’m frightened. I don’t think I can stay here any longer. I hate the thought of Mooney hovering about, looking after me. I shall feel she’s watching me all the time.’

And suddenly she began to cry, quietly, without a sound. I could tell by her shoulders as she sat there in the window-seat. It touched me: it was so long since I had seen any sign of real emotion from Elsie. I went up and put my arm on her shoulder, and, for a wonder, she did not shake it off. Just for a short while we stayed like that. The barrier that had stood between us for so many years was down—for perhaps five minutes.

‘You’d better wait before you decide,’ I protested. ‘We want somewhere to live in while we look round.’

She came back to her ordinary self with a jerk, as it were.

‘I knew you were going to say that. If you want to keep the house on, you’d better tell old Nicholas. I gave him notice yesterday.’

II

That was rather like Elsie, I thought. However, I was not going to make a fuss about it. I had to get back to Cambridge, and for the present she had the nurse still in the house, as well as Ellen. I went upstairs to pack my things, ready for returning the next morning. After some time she came up too, for company, I suppose, and stood there looking on.

‘I wish there wasn’t all this furniture,’ she said, fingering the old mahogany chest of drawers that had belonged to my grandfather. ‘What are we to do with it all?’

‘Sell or store,’ I replied briefly. ‘Or let Percy Cudden look after it for you. He’d do it, like a shot. He’s coming back soon, isn’t he?’

‘I dare say.’

‘Is that all you feel about it?’

‘I don’t think I can face Percy just now. That’s one reason why I’m going.’

‘But where are you going, and when?’

‘Oh, I shall manage somehow. I’m going on my own, for a change. I’ve never been independent, and here’s my chance. Ellen’s coming with me.’

‘Oh well, that’s something.’ Ellen was the young servant who had been retained by Miss Mooney after the break-up of the rectory household. ‘And what am I to do?’

She made a gesture with outspread hands.

‘My dear boy, a man can live anywhere, I suppose. It’s the women who have all the trouble.’ She sat on the bed, silently watching me for a few minutes.

‘It came over me just now. If I don’t take the chance now, I shall probably be stuck here for the rest of my life. If it isn’t Percy, it will be that little clergyman.’ She gave a shiver. ‘I simply can’t stay on in the middle of the country all the rest of my life.’

I considered.

‘I suppose you must do as you like,’ I said, resuming the business of stuffing things into my Gladstone bag (we all used Gladstone bags in those days). ‘If you want to break away you must. I don’t know how poor old Percy will take it when he comes back. I’m sorry about that.’

‘So am I—in a way.’ She sighed, playing listlessly with the fringe of the counterpane. ‘I don’t want to be a nuisance to you, or him, or any one. I simply want to be left alone.’

‘Well, I take it you can hire rooms, or a flat, or something of the kind, in London if you want to. If you take Ellen with you, it will be better than nothing. But I’ve got to get back, you know, and keep my term. I can’t go about house-hunting for you and all that sort of thing.’

‘Of course. That’s all right. I just wanted to go up with you to-morrow, that’s all. You might take me up, and Ellen, and leave us in some decent hotel, and then we could do the rest. I could manage perfectly when I was once up there.’

And quite suddenly she was her old self again, and had gone off to find Ellen and instruct her about what she was to get ready. I heard her even humming a song, which I hadn’t heard for some days in that house.

III

And the next morning we had our things ready early, and got the baker when he called for orders to load them up on his cart, and take them into Ockington

for us. It was always a difficult matter in Ashe to hire any sort of conveyance, and the pony carriage was out of commission just at that moment. The baker was quite ready to take Ellen as well, and we thought she might be useful to look after the luggage at the station. As for ourselves, we decided to walk across the fields by the mill.

And a remarkably hot walk it was. I remember it well. The day of the funeral had been sultry enough, but this was even hotter. We positively had to sit down and take a rest when we came to the mill. Curious, I believe this was the only walk we had ever taken alone together since I could remember. And when we came to the summit of the little rise on which the mill stands we turned round, as if by a common impulse, and looked back on Ashe, and the white stucco face of the old rectory gleaming among the trees, with the spire of the church on the right.

‘And that’s the end of it all,’ said Elsie. ‘At least, I trust it is.’

She was more than usually cheerful during that walk, and I was not. I suppose I felt the shadow of further responsibility hanging over me. Even the cottage was a responsibility, with all that furniture stowed away in it. I wished in my heart that it would take fire and be utterly consumed, furniture and all. And then, what was I to do with this sister of mine? Ought I to leave her in London, alone and unprotected? And where could I go when we got to town? I could only recollect the name of the hotel where my father had stayed once, years ago, when he had to go to London on some business or other, and had taken me with him. There were hotels, of course, at the various stations: perhaps one of those would do. And I still felt rather shy at having to escort a lady. I was not perfectly sure of myself, of where we ought to go for dinner, or how we should dress, or—well!

everything. I dare say it made me rather silent, thinking over all these minor problems.

But we got to Ockington station in due course. And Ellen was there, with the luggage. After all, Ellen was a help : she had to share the responsibility, in a way. And the train came in. We were off. I looked across at Elsie, and felt cheered. It might, in a way, be rather fun. I could stay up in London one night, and then get back to Cambridge, and no harm done. Responsibility apart, staying a night in London was always a treat. And what was there to worry about ? I was much too apt to meet my troubles more than half-way. The luggage was all right, safely stowed in the van just behind. We could put up at the station hotel, so saving a cab. And perhaps after dinner, greatly daring, we might venture forth and see something at a theatre together. But Ellen ? What we were to do with Ellen I did not quite see. However, that could wait.

Problems of that sort, I was beginning to find, generally solved themselves if they were left alone.

And it all turned out quite decently, on the whole. I remember we managed to get seats at the Opera Comique that night, and saw Mrs. Bernard Beere acting in some play the name of which I have forgotten. But Elsie was tremendously taken with the whole thing. It had acted like a charm, this expedition of ours. She was her old self again—only much more friendly, or less patronising, than she had ever been before with me. On the way back, after the performance, she was quite voluble.

‘That was jolly,’ she said. ‘Just exactly the sort of thing I wanted to see. And to think I have wasted all these years without seeing anything really good—isn’t it ridiculous ? You know, you are rather a good boy to bring me up to town for a treat like this, all of a sudden like. I’ll put it down to your credit, some-

where.' She drew a deep breath. 'Oh, I'm so glad to be out of it all. Ashe was getting on my nerves. I don't think I could have stood it another night. I was beginning to be really frightened. I should have seen things soon, I expect.'

'What sort of things?' I asked, humouring her.

She gave a little shiver. 'Oh, Mooney's ghost, I suppose. I'm sure the poor old thing will haunt that place.'

'I'm wondering what on earth we're going to do with it, and the furniture, and everything.'

'I told Mrs. Bagley to keep an eye on it. Couldn't we let it, furnished?'

'I suppose I can try,' I said doubtfully. 'Only, I must get back to-morrow. I say, I do hope you'll be all right up here by yourself.'

She laughed quite gaily. 'With a few million others. Oh! I'm right enough. Frankly, I'm a lot less nervous here than I should have been down there. Ellen and I will begin looking round as soon as you've gone.'

She was so cheerful that night that I began to feel I had done the right thing after all. I went back to Cambridge the next day feeling a lot better—except now and then, when a wave of sudden mistrust would sweep over me. At any rate, I should see Jonny soon and be able to talk it over with him. And Percy would be sure to turn up as soon as he came back from abroad. Only Percy was rather a difficulty himself. I could not in the least see how I was to handle him tactfully.

IV

I had not been away from Cambridge much more than a week—ten days, I think, to be exact—but it seemed an age since I had gone, that opening Wednesday of the races. Now they were all over, and the

bump supper that followed was a thing of the past, and the third-year men were waiting for the tripos lists and wishing they had given a little more time to their subject, and perhaps a little less to rowing or cricket. I was told that the first boat had gone up two places, and the second had all but got their oars, and that Kirwan had been very nearly off his head. Also that Burnett had been up for the occasion, and been seduced into making another speech, in which he said things about Magnus (captain of the University cricket team that year) that must have made things a bit difficult next time they met in Lord's pavilion. To which, by the way, Kirwan had replied, maintaining stoutly that Magnus deserved the thanks not only of Mike's, but of the whole University, for having (unconsciously) provided a seven fit to back up any stroke who ever lived. It was, I heard from Germain, on my staircase, a most successful evening, and there had not really been any ragging worth mentioning. Even Wilks had made a speech—before the meeting became too uproarious.

Jonny, whom you may be sure I sought out as soon as I could, had arranged to stay up most of the Long.

'Burnett wants me to play for the county in the rest of the matches,' he told me. 'Rubbing it in to Magnus, I suppose—if I happen to come off.'

'I wish they'd ask you to play for the Gentlemen,' I said. 'That would be a real score.'

He laughed. 'That can wait a year or two,' he said. The dark blue eyes clouded over suddenly. 'I say, I was awfully sorry to hear about Miss Mooney.' He hesitated a moment before going on. 'How's your—sister taking it?'

I told him, more or less, what had happened. He sat silent, considering.

'I wish I'd been there. I might have been able to help.'

‘That’s just what I said. I tried to explain to her what you would have said. But I’m not sure if I got it right. What do you believe? I take it it’s no comfort to Elsie to be told of a glorious resurrection at the Day of Judgment. It isn’t to me. I don’t like this thought of going into a state of suspended animation and waiting—for a very problematic assize. I want something logical and reasonable—something that I can believe in without mental reservations. Frankly, I can’t believe in the resurrection of the body. I don’t particularly want this old body back again. I should like a better one.’

‘Well, perhaps you will get one.’

‘There must be some logical scheme of the universe to be found, if we only go on trying to find it hard enough. Just now, after the last few days, this seems to me the most important thing in the whole world to discover. The old schemes are not good enough. I can’t believe in any of them—any that I have heard of so far. I can’t believe that we go out like the snuff of a candle, and that all this thinking and reasoning apparatus perishes with our bodies. I know some persons comfort themselves, or try to, with vague moralisings about being absorbed into the Infinite—into the General Sum of Things. I don’t want to be absorbed. I want to retain my individuality.’

‘I take it our bodies come up again in other forms. They are absorbed all right.’

I waved the body aside. ‘These things? Oh, I recognise they have to go. Of course we all know that they decay and are eaten of worms (I have never really liked worms), and provide nourishment for plants and yew trees, and so forth. It’s the other two parts of our composition that I am concerned in discussing.’

‘What are they?’

‘You should attend Wilks on the “Republic.” I don’t know whether Plato was the first to find it out,

but he certainly divided man into three parts—the appetites, which answer to the body, the rational part, and the spiritual part. Well, the appetites can perish for all I care, but I have a feeling that the rest ought to persist.’

‘Wilks has been saying that, has he? Look here, it has struck me from time to time that the Senior Tutor is rather a sensible old bird than otherwise. Why not go and talk to him about the next world?’

‘One has an idea he would simply tell one to go to chapel—and all that sort of thing.’

‘Not he. The Dean might, but Wilks wouldn’t. He’s only in orders because he had to take them. He’s not bound down to suggest no solutions but those that were current when they invented the Nicene Creed. That’s the only fault I have to find with being brought up at a country rectory, like we were. It rather stifles anything like independence of thought. Now Wilks will talk to you quite freely—if you let him. Good chap, Wilks.’

And he embarked on a long explanation of what he had managed to get out of Wilks. Jonny was not always very lucid on subjects of this kind, and besides, he admitted that he had not altogether made up his mind on some points. But that he was on the right track he was certain. And somehow he drifted into discussing that affair with Reggie Hicks. He never thought of that episode now without feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself. He had lost his head—which was something one should never permit oneself to do. One of his theories, at present, was that an action of that sort damaged the spiritual side of you just as a wound damaged the physical side. Loss of temper had a bad effect. You might get over it, but at the best it left a scar behind.’

‘Where did you get that from?’

‘I suppose you wouldn’t believe I thought it out

for myself.' He smiled. 'In fact, it came from one Herrick. You remember Herrick, that fellow I used to lodge with in Leicester? He was full of sound ideas, that chap. I often wonder where he got them from. Is there such a thing as originality in the world? I suppose all these theories have to start somewhere.'

'We pick them up, and polish them, and adapt them to our own requirements,' I suggested.

'You remember how Percy and you and I used to sit half the night at Ashe talking over these things. Well, Herrick yarned away more than any of us—more than even old Percy Cudden. When he wasn't talking about cricket he was talking about our future development. He would have pleased you, I think. He had it all worked out to the *n*th degree, as logical as you please. Though why you, going out in classics, should be so keen on that sort of thing, I don't know.'

'Go on about Herrick. I want to hear what he thought.'

Jonny collected his thoughts, considering a little with eyes gazing at a hole in my carpet, where some gay sportsman had been giving a demonstration of how to twirl on one foot like a dancing dervish. He liked to take his time over any topic at all serious.

'The astonishing thing about Herrick is that he's so absolutely sure he's right. I suppose a good many prophets and preachers are—but then he's not exactly a prophet or a preacher. He just maintains that there's no such thing as death at all—or rather that death only affects this outer husk, which isn't ourselves at all. He would say, for example, that the Canon and Miss Mooney are just as much alive at this moment as they ever were. Rather more so than they were towards the end of their time on this sphere. He says they've got bodies, just as they had here, only made of some less dense matter. There's no particular change in their way of thought, either. | Prob-

ably Miss Mooney is still doing her best to look after Miss Strange, and the Canon is helping us—when he has nothing more important to do.’

‘It all sounds very nice, but how did he arrive at these conclusions?’

Jonny moved a little uneasily in his chair.

‘He says they told him.’

‘Oh! you mean he’s one of those mediums?’

I suppose I allowed my face to show disappointment. The fact was, I had been going through a course of Robert Browning, and had imbibed something of his sceptical spirit. The majority of sensible people (that is, people who considered themselves sensible) in those days thought very much the same as the author of *Mr. Sludge ‘The Medium.’*

Jonny made a slight gesture of irritation.

‘That’s just it. I knew you’d take it that way as soon as I said anything about spirit communication. That’s why I never spoke of it before. Besides, I don’t really know, myself, yet.’

He broke off suddenly.

‘Do you mean you think there’s really anything in it at all?’

‘If the Canon hadn’t told me I was to come up here, I should never have left those works at Leicester.’

‘How do you mean? When did he tell you?’

‘Oh, a day or two after you wrote. I remember now, it was the Sunday evening, after I got back from Ashe. I had been out there, you know, to see your sister and Percy. We were sitting round a table, Herrick and Miss Herrick and myself. We sometimes used to, on Sunday evenings.’

‘You don’t mean to say you believe in all that table-rapping business?’

Jonny for the first time got a little annoyed.

‘I’m trying to tell you what happened,’ he said, rather stiffly. ‘As to how much I believe, that can wait.’

‘ Sorry, old chap. What did happen ? ’

But I had spoiled it. Jonny was self-conscious, and refused to enter into details. It all sounded so ridiculous, as he admitted, when you told it in cold blood to any one else. But there it was. All he could say was, it happened. The table spelt out the word
S T R A N G E.

‘ How did it spell it out ? ’ I asked, mystified.

And he had to explain that. All three of them had their hands on the top of the table, and Miss Herrick called out the letters of the alphabet, and when she came to the right one the table gave a sort of tilt. You couldn’t mistake it when it happened. Yes, it was all very complicated and very absurd, but could I devise any better method on the spur of the moment ? Then, of course, one could ask questions. It was easy enough to arrange a simple code for answers. There it was ! That was all he could say about it. He asked if it was the Canon, of course, and the table said it was ; and then he asked whether he ought to take this opportunity, or scholarship, or whatever I liked to call it. There was no mistake about the answer there. It was very strong indeed.

And that was as far as we got. Jonny at the best of times was never exactly a communicative man, and I recognised that he had gone a long way beyond his usual limit with me. But I did not know in the least what to make of it all. If Jonny had not been so remarkably sane in all his habits, I should not have thought much about it. In those days one was generally content to shrug one’s shoulders at any mention of the occult, and hint at the likelihood of a screw being loose somewhere. These things simply did not happen. Anything was preferable as an explanation—collective hallucination, or hypnotic influence, or mere trickery. Chiefly, no doubt, this last. We were a materialistic age, believing in nothing except the

general depravity of those who encouraged superstition. Had not Huxley written of the Gadarene swine in our leading review? I forget exactly what he had written, but we all felt it to be eminently satisfactory: the swine had made no show at all against his victorious analysis.

No! this spiritualistic rubbish simply could not bear examination either, if you looked at it seriously. To think of my dear old father coming back from the grave to play at tilting a table in an obscure house in Leicester, that he had never seen in his life. No sane person could believe it. If any one but Jonny Waring had told the story I should merely have laughed in his face. Jonny had been deceived, somehow. Simple enough, when one thought it over. Herrick must have known something of his previous history at Ashe: how my father had taken him up and educated him. Probably Herrick himself was keen on Jonny coming up to Cambridge and making a name as a cricketer, and thought it a justifiable trick. With his daughter to help, nothing could be easier than to carry out the deception.

But fancy Jonny, of all people, being taken in like that! One would have thought him the very last person—except that the very best of us always had a screw loose somewhere. And I could not deny that the Herricks, between them, appeared to have done some good. They had brought him up to Cambridge—unless he was deceiving himself, and the impulse had really come from some other source.

v

It was a few days later that I got one of my very rare letters from Elsie. She and I had never been great correspondents: in fact, the sight of her large and characteristic handwriting was so rare as to be rather

disturbing at the breakfast table. It generally meant trouble of some sort, present or future.

This one had no address on it at all. Nothing but the date. And it began by saying that she was perfectly well, and quite satisfied with her present lodgings. As for the furniture in the cottage, I could do with it what I liked—except for the few things in her own room. She might very likely want those some time, and so they had better be stored if I could get some one to keep them, not too expensively. But the important thing was, for the present, that she wanted to be left alone. I was not to make any effort to find out where she was staying, or what she was doing. I must take her word for it that she was perfectly all right, with comfortable rooms and Ellen to look after her. She just wanted to feel Free—for a time. Perhaps in a month or so she might write again. But for the present, if I would be a good boy and leave her quite alone, she would be most obliged.

‘Really,’ I said to myself, ‘she is the most remarkable specimen, this sister of mine.’

And, if I had anything of great importance to communicate in the meantime, I might send it on to Messrs. Arnold, Pyke, and Sterndale, in Bishopsgate Street. They had kindly agreed to forward any letters.

I gave a shrug of the shoulders. That was Bob Sterndale’s firm, of course. I might have guessed she had brought one of her admirers in to help her somehow. And what I was going to do when Percy Cudden turned up, as he would probably do in a few hours’ time, I did not know. I put the letter down with a sigh, and turned to my bacon and eggs and coffee. And, sure enough, I had hardly got back from my first morning lecture than in he came, as flamboyant in appearance as ever, but looking a trifle more disturbed than usual.

*Chapter VII**Feminine Independence*

I

Now that women are called to the Bar, and sit in Parliament, and in general have secured a footing in most of the professions that we formerly arrogated to ourselves (as by Right Divine), it is easy enough to sympathise with an ardent spirit that had been so long swathed in those terrible sweeping feminine skirts, cramped in those restricting corsets of the nineteenth century. What must my poor sister have felt during those twenty years or so that she had passed at Ashe ! I suppose she must have felt sometimes like a caged bird, wondering whether the bars would ever be lifted to let her out, soaring aloft into the azure sky. For I doubt not she felt within her the power to soar high enough if she were given the chance.

The chance had come at last, and, naturally enough, she had spread her wings. And here was Percy Cudden in my rooms, not a little perturbed in mind thereat. For had she not strayed into the enchanted territory of London, where dwelt all manner of giants, dragons, and other monsters most dangerous to inexperienced damsels from the country ! Of course he wanted to set out forthwith, being a gallant fellow, and rescue her, whether she wished it or no. I had some little difficulty in persuading him that he had better wait a while. In a week or so I should have kept my term, and would be able to come with him on the adventure. At present, I confessed, I did not even know where she was to be found.

You can imagine Percy pacing up and down my narrow room, on fire with the thought of dashing forth to rescue, and how I exhausted all my tactful art in explaining to him that Elsie had been awfully upset,

and wanted a change : had insisted, in short, on being quite by herself for a while.

‘ I ’m only thinking of her up there all alone,’ he explained. ‘ Rotten for a girl, with no one to go about and do things for her.’ Insensibly I could not help picturing Percy as a sort of Newfoundland dog, weighed down with parcels, following his mistress from shop door to shop door. ‘ I mean to say, here I am, just back from abroad, with nothing to do for the moment. Nothing I should like better than just helping her to find a decent flat, or something.’

‘ Well,’ I temporised, ‘ in a week or two we can go up together and see if we can run her to earth.’

‘ You see,’ went on the anxious lover, ‘ there are no end of people in London only too ready to do you in the eye if you ’re not careful. Besides, anything might happen at any moment. Suppose she was robbed—or found herself without any money—or anything.’

I pointed out that she could always telegraph to me if she was in trouble. Or to him, if it came to that. She knew where we were to be found. And she was not altogether alone. She had a maid with her.

‘ The fact is,’ I said, floundering a little, I dare say, ‘ she has been tied up so long. I don’t wonder if she craves for a little independence.’

Percy was on to that like a flash.

‘ Rather. Of course, I quite see that. You know, I never meant her to feel tied, so far as I was concerned. I only wanted to—er—have the right to help if she found herself in any difficulty.’

I said, rather incautiously, that I expected she had found some one to help her all right. Of course that was a silly thing to let out, but I was naturally thinking of Bob Sterndale, and by degrees Percy got it out of me that she had given the address of that young man’s firm in case I wanted to write.

‘ Well, that settles it,’ he said, very red in the face.

‘I’ll go there myself and see what I can do. After all, I’ve more right to help her than young Sterndale.’

And I had to begin all over again, explaining that she had particularly asked me to let her try her own hand for a time. Later, we might go up together and find out if there was anything we could do. I could see my bit of information about Sterndale bothered the poor fellow a good deal, but I got him to agree at last. I switched him off on to the subject of the cottage.

‘What I am to do with it I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to go and live there all by myself. And she swears she’ll never live there again. She said something about storing the furniture, or perhaps letting it furnished.’

He brightened up at once in the most marvellous way at the thought of having something to do on her behalf.

‘Oh! I can manage that. Rather. Just the very thing I wanted. A friend of mine was asking me only the other day if I knew of a small place he could hire for a few months in Leicestershire. Three horses—he can stable them at the rectory, or at Harrison’s if he prefers it. Excellent! I’m glad you happened to mention that.’

I did not believe more than half of what he said, but it was so comforting to be able to shuffle that particular trouble off my shoulders that I raised no objection. And the cheerful Percy did actually get some one down to inhabit that cottage of ours for the rest of our term. Possibly he may have paid them to come: he was perfectly capable of doing so. And in the end I had no further trouble with that bogey. He got Wallop to sell most of the furniture when our tenant left. The contents of Elsie’s room, I found afterwards, he religiously preserved somewhere in Fleckney. Like most young men with red hair, he was an arrant sentimentalist.

But he held me to that project of going up to London together when I had kept my full term.

'When will you be ready? Ten days? Right, expect me in ten days' time precisely, and we'll go up hand in hand. I rather want a little amusement. This time on the Continong hasn't been exactly amusing. I was wanting to come back like the deuce ever since I started.'

It was admirable to see how he kept up an appearance of gaiety through most of that visit. Just now and then a sort of shadow seemed to pass rapidly across his face. I have no doubt he knew perfectly well all the time that his very one-sided engagement, if you can call it an engagement, was at an end, but he was not going to whimper about it. Give him only the least thing to do in her service, and he would be happy enough. He said as much at the end, before starting off to the station.

'I say, old chap,' he wound up, with a good deal of hesitation, and getting redder in the face than ever, 'if you do write to her you might make it clear that I'm not—er—asking for anything. Will you?'

I did write and tell her, but I might as well, apparently, have said nothing at all. Elsie had never been a writer of letters, and on this occasion my epistle, addressed to the firm of Arnold, Pyke, and Sterndale, as requested, produced no reply whatsoever.

II

I finished my term, and Percy came up, as he said he would, and we started off to town together, after spending a fairly lively evening with Kirwan and one or two other friends in my room. Jonny was staying up that Long too, in order to get through some work, but just then he was travelling round with the county cricket team.

Percy was in a state of some excitement at the prospect of spending a few days in London, where She lived. It would be strange, he thought, if we could not find her between us. And from the moment we arrived at our hotel—we had gone to one of the new Northumberland Avenue buildings, then not very long erected—he was at me to set to work and trace her out.

‘Suppose she doesn’t want to be traced?’ I protested feebly.

‘She can always say so. What I’m so afraid of is that she may have got into some sort of difficulty, and be too proud to appeal for help. She has a tremendous lot of spirit.’

‘Oh, I know that well enough.’ I thought on the many occasions when I had been thoroughly snubbed.

‘You say she never answered your last letter?’ went on my companion. ‘I think you ought to pursue the matter a bit further on that. I mean to say, dash it all, she might want assistance badly.’

I opined that the number of distressed damsels who really required help from gallant knights at the latter end of the nineteenth century was inconsiderable. They were very well able to look after themselves, as a rule. Besides, Elsie had always been a rotten correspondent.

‘I know, I know. She’s not the sort that like writing.’ Percy’s face wrinkled, as though he were trying to forget the number of times she had left his ardent letters unanswered. ‘Some people are. But, with regard to the rest, do you never read the papers? There are all sorts of rotters about.’

‘I dare say. Perhaps you are right. But you’ll agree that Elsie is fairly capable. She ought to be able to look after herself.’

‘You think that relieves you of any further responsibility. I tell you what is the matter with you, my lad. Indolence.’

And Percy began to gesticulate in the fervour of his emotion as he walked up and down the room.

‘All I say is that, in case of accident, we must know where she is to be found. The first thing we have to do is obviously to go and interview this chap Sterndale.’

I hesitated, foreseeing there might be trouble if these two young men met.

‘Shall I write to him?’ I said.

Percy swung round on his heel—my recollection of him at this time is that he was always pacing up and down the room—and withered me with a glance.

‘Write! Good God, no, man. Let’s go and see the beggar at once and have it out. Face to face.’

I did not want to go in the least, but I fear I was apt in those days to allow myself to be led about by my more energetic friends. And at two o’clock the next day, after luncheon, we set out together towards the city, and eventually found our way to an office in a curious little court running back off Bishopsgate Street Within (as it was then called). Percy, of course, took charge of the proceedings. But we had to wait a long time before we got the man we wanted. He was down at the House and had to be summoned up, and then they found he had just gone out for a late lunch, business being very brisk at that time. We sat in a small room, furnished with a few heavily padded chairs, and waited, while Percy grew more and more impatient. But our man arrived at last—a very dapper figure of a man too. There was something about the look of Bob Sterndale that always made me feel wrongly dressed.

And he was perfectly at his ease, apparently, while we certainly were not. That period of waiting had something to do with it, I suppose, and then Percy was too anxious to find out everything at once, and I was anxious that he should not compare too badly with Bob himself. For I was conscious that Percy never

looked quite at his best in London. Curious, this deadening effect of the great metropolis on some of our provincial heroes. I could never help feeling, when going about with him (and particularly in the West End), that his red hair was out of place in that grey atmosphere, his fancy waistcoats at variance with the sober spirit of those discreet squares. I have felt as though I were accompanied by some daylight masquerader, a survival from last night's fancy-dress ball.

But Bob Sterndale greeted us, I will say, in the most friendly manner.

'Hullo! Strange, of all people. I could hardly believe it when they said you were here. Don't often see you in the City.' He looked at Percy as we were shaking hands. 'Why, of course, I remember you too. Cudden, surely? Didn't we act together down at Ashe in the old days? Come and have some lunch, will you? Had it? Well, try a cigarette, or one of these cigars.' And he dug out a fat box of Henry Clays from a drawer in his table.

I took a cigarette. Percy refused. It was with difficulty he could be got to sit down. But he did at last, and waited loyally for me to begin, fidgeting in his chair with impatience.

I got to the point at last. Bluntly enough, too.

'I say,' I began, 'I was wondering if you had seen anything of my sister. I rather—wanted to know where she was to be found.'

And I could see Percy's face, as I spoke, taking on a look of such intense eagerness as to be almost comic. I think Bob noticed it too, for he stroked his moustache to hide a smile.

'Well, you know, I did happen to see something of Miss Strange when she came up. In fact, to be quite frank, she appealed to me to help her in one or two little things. I need not say I did my best. Who wouldn't—for your sister?'

A half-strangled sound came from Percy Cudden, sitting uneasily on his chair. I did not dare to look at him. He may simply have been intending approval of these sentiments, or he may have been aghast at the temerity of a mere acquaintance voicing them so freely.

‘I had a sort of idea you might have come across her. I wish you’d let me know where she is now. I tried her hotel, but they did not seem to know.’

There was an almost imperceptible pause before Sterndale answered.

‘Of course I should be delighted if I could. But I’m afraid it’s impossible.’

‘That’s rather awkward. I particularly wanted to see her about something.’

And then Percy broke in. I hardly recognised his voice when he spoke; it seemed to have changed in tone.

‘Do you mean that you don’t know, or that you don’t want to say?’

I looked up at him in some alarm, for it sounded as though he was trying to pick a quarrel. But Sterndale took it very well. He smiled quite pleasantly, in a disarming manner.

‘Well, if you put it like that, I suppose I must confess that I am, more or less, bound to secrecy. Miss Strange did not want any one to know her address, for the moment.’

Percy looked like a thunder-cloud, but said no more.

‘Do you know at all what she’s doing?’ I was rather at a loss how to proceed.

‘Sorry, but I really don’t see how I can say anything more.’ Sterndale made a gesture indicating regretful inability. ‘You see, it’s a secret, for the present, and I simply dare not let it out.’ He was very suave and pleasant as he stood there, looking thoroughly well appointed and equal to the occasion. I am afraid we did not pass inspection quite as well: Percy, at any rate, looked decidedly ruffled.

And we had to go without getting any more out of him, except that he graciously promised to let me know as soon as he was allowed to speak.

‘What the devil did the fellow mean?’ Percy broke out as soon as we shut the door behind us. ‘Lord! I hate that damned superior sort of politeness. I say, are they secretly married, or anything like that?’

He took off his hat and began to mop his forehead.

‘Bless you, no! Why should they be? After all, we’ve known him nearly all our lives. And I suppose he’s the only person she could very well go to in London.’

‘We ought to have got it out of him somehow.’

‘What! Tied him up and tortured him, with a room full of clerks just outside?’

‘A little thumbscrew would do him no end of good,’ grumbled Percy, but he subsided into a grudging laugh. ‘It’s all very fine, but I don’t believe half of it. He just made out it was a secret to flatter his own importance. I say, you don’t really think there’s anything in it—anything between those two, do you?’

I did my best to persuade him there was, and could be, nothing at all. But now and again during that afternoon I caught him with a certain look on his face and knew well enough what he was thinking about. A transparent fellow, Percy, as I have said before.

III

But we were there, and a fine August afternoon, and I remembered Leicester were playing Middlesex at Lord’s, and Jonny was in the match. On a fine afternoon I have always liked, of all things, watching a match at Lord’s. I persuaded Percy at last we might as well do that as walk about the streets. So off we went to Baker Street by the old sulphurous Underground, and then on to St. John’s Wood, and found

the tail end of the Leicestershire team wagging nobly after (it must be confessed) a pretty poor start by the great guns.

We were rather lucky, for Jonny himself was at the wickets when we arrived, and the telegraph board showed eight wickets down for a hundred and forty runs. And Jonny was in very enterprising form. He had come on a lot as a bat that year, and had made several big scores for Mike's in college matches. He had no particular grace of style, it is true, but he could hit, and there is always something eminently satisfactory about your clean hitter. Jonny Waring was a tall young fellow at that time, standing, I suppose, a fraction over six foot high, and he had a very useful reach. But he was one of those natural hitters who seldom leave their ground to make a half-volley of anything at all short. He just stood inside the crease and hit, fast-footed, as some people call it.

'I can't get out of it,' he used to explain. 'Doesn't seem natural to me to step out, somehow. Father was always at us to keep that right foot pegged down.'

I dare say that was the reason, or one of them. Besides which, Jonny always used to assert that he preferred a length ball to hit. It went over the ropes so satisfactorily. And a six is worth more than a four, whatever way you look at it. He sent one crashing into the pavilion seats just as we came on to the ground, and his score on the big board opposite us raced up merrily from 16 to 22 to the accompaniment of a decorous hum of approval.

'Good old Jonny!' said my companion, momentarily forgetful of his troubles. 'I say, that's the stuff, and no mistake. How does the man do it?' For it looked as though the batsman had just leaned forward against the ball, in the most effortless, easy way, and the next moment four more runs were being signalled to his score.

‘Just timing,’ I explained. ‘Wonderful what you can do by applying a little force at the right moment. But that went to the boundary at some pace, all the same. I expect mid-off was just as glad he couldn’t reach it.’

We got a couple of seats on the far side of the ground and settled down to watch.

‘One thing about him is that they won’t frighten him out,’ said Percy. ‘I always said that was his strong suit. He’s got the nerve of an ox.’

He took liberties occasionally, it is true. I suppose he would have done better if he could have persuaded himself that it might be useful to leave a few of those balls on the off-side alone. At that time he went for almost all of them, and they were apt to go in all sorts of queer directions. Generally over point’s head, or somewhere up in the slips. But when he was in luck he certainly scored faster then than after he had acquired more favour in the eyes of the critics. He added eighty runs odd while we sat and watched him that day in less than half an hour before he was caught by cover from a mishit, last man out.

We strolled out in front of the pavilion, to see if we could discover any one we knew. And there was Burnett, naturally, leaning over the rails and looking more rubicund than ever. Somehow or other I was not expecting to see Burnett then, though he generally followed the fortunes of his county. He recognised me at once.

‘Hullo, Strange. Up to have a look round, eh? Not so dusty after all. Two-fifty will give them something to think about. I say, fancy that fellow Magnus leaving our friend out of the Cambridge team. He ought to be crucified upside down.’

‘He’s coming on as a bat,’ I ventured.

‘Coming on? Damn it, man, he’s precisely the man any sane captain would give his boots to have in a Varsity match. Lord! when I think of what might

have been, I 'd tar and feather that young man. Boiling tar, too. Think of the way half an hour of that hitting can alter the whole complexion of a game. And the way it puts spirit into the rest of 'em. Eh? Not to say anything of his bowling.'

He caught sight of another friend over my head, and hailed him in his rich, confident voice. I used to say you could tell his profession from that voice.

'Hullo, Jimmy. How goes it?' he called out to the stout and red-faced contemporary who was walking across to his seat in the covered stand. And we moved slowly on, a little reluctantly perhaps, for it was something for young men of our age to be seen conversing amicably with former county players.

'By the way, Strange, how's your sister?' His mellow voice arrested us again, with something of a shock this time. I expect we were both brought up standing, so to speak, probably with our mouths open. 'Saw her on the ground just now, but she seemed to be in a bit of a hurry.'

And he waved his hand at us cheerfully, while Jimmy (whoever he may have been) took our place against the pavilion rails and entered into hearty talk.

IV

I wished afterwards he had not thought of that last remark, for it completely spoiled the rest of my day.

Finding one errant damsel at Lord's, when the ground is pretty full, is never an easy job, and we only had a few minutes in which to conduct our search, for the bell would be going soon for a resumption of the game. But Percy Cudden took me firmly in hand and made me work for my living that afternoon. He was determined to find Elsie, if she was there. We walked round the ground twice as rapidly as we could, before we were ordered off. Then we walked round again,

slowly and carefully, examining the backs of the various stands, which is never a very exciting performance. And of course we never caught sight of any one in the least like Elsie.

‘ Hang it ! ’ I protested, ‘ it ’s as bad as looking for a needle in a haystack. And I want to see Jonny bowl them out.’

But it was no good. Percy turned upon me a face marked with grave displeasure.

‘ My dear man. He said She was on the ground.’

After that what could be said ? I could not even protest when he hinted that probably she would slip away soon now, perhaps for tea. The only way to make certain, after all, would be to watch the exits. If I would take the one at the nursery end, he would look after the other. Then he did not see how she could very well get past us without being detected.

I thought it a rotten idea, but he was clearly in no mood to be thwarted. I allowed him to go and watch his gate, and contented myself with hanging about the neighbourhood of the other except when a roar of applause told me that anything exciting had occurred. Then I would dash off and look at the telegraph board. But I confess it was a poor way of seeing a match—even though Jonny did take four out of the five wickets that fell before the close of play. He appeared to be sticking up the Middlesex men pretty well.

As to Percy, I never saw him again until I got back to our hotel, and found him sitting in the lounge, looking very glum.

‘ Any luck ? ’ I asked. ‘ No sign of the lady my side. I missed you somehow after they drew stumps.’

‘ I wasn’t there.’

‘ Didn’t you stay to the end ? ’

‘ She came out at six o’clock.’

‘ Oh ! You did see her, then ? Well, what did she say ? ’

He hesitated a moment. 'She didn't say anything.'

'Not say anything? Didn't you speak to her?'

Percy's face reddened visibly, as it had a trick of doing when he felt anything strongly. He apparently found some difficulty in speaking.

'No, I didn't.' He cleared his throat.

I looked up in astonishment. It really was a bit thick, I thought, after waiting all that time and incidentally completely ruining my enjoyment of the match.

'You mean to say you didn't find out where she lived, or anything?'

And then I was sorry I had spoken, for I saw that Percy was labouring under considerable emotion. There were tears in his eyes—or at any rate not far off. But he made a tremendous effort to appear quite as usual.

'I couldn't, very well. As our friend Burnett said, she seemed in a hurry.'

'I suppose she didn't notice you.'

That was a fatuous thing to say, but one has a way of pulling out the wrong stop at that age. And what I really meant to imply was that she hadn't seen him in the crowd. For I had a suspicion of the truth.

'Quite right!' Percy Cudden broke into a rather hysterical laugh. 'She wouldn't see me. She just looked through me as though I wasn't there.'

I knew that trick of hers well, and it always used to irritate me more than anything. For the moment I felt a gust of anger against her. She had no right to treat Percy like that: it was sheer cruelty.

'I suppose she had a pressing engagement somewhere,' I suggested lamely.

'I suppose so,' he responded drily. There was a moment's pause. Then he took hold of himself firmly.

'Look here, old fellow, I didn't mean it exactly like that. I mean to say, I've not the smallest wish to complain. Heavens! I've no ground for complaint. Your sister was good enough to give me a sort of licence

to hang on. I wouldn't have let her engage herself, as you know. I've never told a soul a word about it, except you. She let me stand a little way off and worship. Well, it was damned good of her.'

His voice shook a little at the last sentence, but he carried it through all right.

'I think she's treated you infernally badly,' I said.

'My dear man, she's done nothing of the sort. I was a fool, trying to find out where she was when she didn't want me to know. It was—just that I hadn't seen her for half a year or so. I was hungry. Well, I saw her to-day, anyhow. That's something. And to-morrow I think I'd better go back home. They'll want me there.'

V

I had not the heart to try and persuade Percy to stay with me any longer, though I felt very lonely by myself in the great city. London in those days rather terrified me. I did not yet know my way about as well as I felt an undergraduate in his second year should, and I was still shy enough to imagine that everybody was noticing my provincial appearance and commenting on my hat, or tie, or boots. It takes some time for the novice to realise that the ordinary Londoner cares not two straws for the stranger within his gates—that so long as he keeps within the law he may wear pretty nearly anything he chooses, and perform any antics he likes. Of course the grip of convention may have been stronger then than it is now. We were living in Victoria's reign, just before the first jubilee, and it was expected of us that we should dress in a certain style, in certain parts of town. But I need not have been quite so anxious about my appearance as I undoubtedly was.

Solitude made things much harder for me. With Percy Cudden, or Jonny, or any of my Cambridge

acquaintances I could always make shift to go about and enjoy myself normally. Alone I was perpetually assailed by a thousand fears that I might be doing the wrong thing—offending against some unknown canon of London law. However, one has to learn by experience, and I forced myself to go about and familiarise myself with the place and its affairs. After all, if I was called to the Bar, I should presumably have to live there, and the sooner I began the easier it would be. Accordingly, I looked over several sets of rooms in several places, and was fortunate enough at last to find one in the Temple itself that was going to be given up at the end of the year. The furniture was for sale too—if I wanted it. I thought I could do with the book-shelves, and a few of the other things like chairs and tables. I did not quite know how far my rights extended over the furniture still at Ashe, or how much of it Elsie might not one day demand. So on reflection, as the offer seemed fairly reasonable, I closed with the present owner, and agreed to take possession as soon as he retired.

After a while I got so bored that I forced myself to go and look up Bob Sterndale again at his city office. He greeted me with unexpected warmth.

‘Hullo, Strange! The very man I wanted to see. Come in and have a chat.’ And he led the way into his office, and once more produced his Henry Clays and a box of cigarettes.

‘I was wondering how I could get at you,’ he went on. ‘You never told me where you were staying when you called here the other day with that fellow from Fleckney. Funny chap, isn’t he? Always reminds me of a cockatoo.’

‘Percy Cudden is a real good sort,’ I protested.

‘Rather. Most amusing chap, I should think. Well, as I was saying, your sister wants a few words with you.’

‘ Very kind of her ! I think she might have condescended to answer my last letter.’ But I gave him my address.

‘ I expect she ’s been pretty busy,’ said Sterndale. ‘ But I know she ’s anxious to see you.’

‘ Well, tell her I shall be glad to see her for dinner to-morrow, and a theatre afterwards if she likes. Can you communicate with her in time for that ? ’

‘ Oh, yes. I think I can manage that all right. I expect she ’ll be glad of a heart-to-heart talk.’

And I went back, after wasting half an hour or more of Bob’s time, in a more cheerful mood. I was really glad at the prospect of seeing Elsie again, badly as I considered she had behaved to Percy. I felt a thrill of pleasure when I got a note in her generous, characteristic hand passed over to me at the desk the next afternoon. It had been brought over by special messenger, and she would be there that evening at seven. She also mentioned what she considered the best piece on at the moment which she had not yet seen.

I went out and got tickets for it at once.

And that evening, when she came into the lounge, I was taken aback for the moment. She looked altogether so much more important a personage than she had when we were still at Ashe. In this new atmosphere she seemed to have blossomed forth—to have developed from bud to full-blown flower. For the moment I had the illusion that I must be entertaining some one of royal blood. The right thing to do would surely be to kneel and kiss her hand.

But I seldom do the right thing. I merely got up and placed a chair for her.

‘ You look as if you had come into a fortune,’ I said. ‘ I ’ve never seen you quite so smart.’

But she sat down as though she had hardly heard me. And for the greater part of dinner it was very difficult to get any reasonable reply from her. I told her what

tickets I had got, and the trouble I had to get them, and she still sat looking through me in an absent-minded fashion. I got rather annoyed at last.

'I say, you might speak sometimes.' I leaned forwards to attract her attention. 'After all, I'm not Percy Cudden. I understood you particularly wished to have a talk with me.'

She seemed to come to herself suddenly. (I am telling you what happened: whether it was a pose or not, I could not say, but she was always rather fond of these mystifying tricks.)

'I simply felt I couldn't bear to speak to him just then,' she said. 'He looked so—so hungry.'

'He felt it, I understand.'

She made a sweeping gesture. 'Well, it frightened me. I felt like a bird being asked to enter a cage after it had just escaped. You know, I hate hurting any one. I was sorry afterwards.'

'That's something,' I conceded. 'I suppose you've definitely made up your mind that you won't marry him?'

'How can I possibly tell? All I can say is, that I don't want to marry any one at present. Why should I be perpetually bothered with boys wanting to marry me? They are boys—most of them. I sometimes think I might take an oldish man, if he had nice grey hair, and a pince-nez, and an aristocratic appearance. And, of course, some money. By the way, I want some money. That's why I sent you a message.'

It was useful to have an agile mind when talking to Elsie, in one of these moods. She had the trick of leaving out most of her connecting links.

'What on earth do you want money for?'

In a flash she had changed to a sort of mischievous sprite.

'Oh, all sorts of things. You can't imagine how

money runs away in a flat—with a single woman and a maid, and no calculating male brain to regulate the expenditure. I want to buy a new pair of wings. Not that my old ones are getting soiled, of course. I did not mean that. But a stronger pair. I want to fly away and be at rest.'

'How much do you want?'

She appeared to consider, the tips of her slender fingers pressed together, her elbows on the table.

'How much have you got?'

'Just about the same as you, I suppose.' I was not taking her too seriously. But she changed her manner again, suddenly.

'There's that thousand pounds that was put by for Cambridge expenses. I want that, if you can manage it. Of course, half of it belongs to me, really.'

'Does it? I never knew that.'

'Don't be childish. We talked that over long ago. And look here! I'm serious about this. It may mean all the difference in the world to me. I just must have that money. I'm asking you because I know you'd rather I came to you than to—any of these others.'

'Well, I should hope so. How could you think of——'

'Oh, any one of them would lend it gladly enough. Only I prefer to keep my independence, if possible. Lend me half, if you like. I'll take my five hundred and borrow yours. Only I must have it by the day after to-morrow.'

'What's going to happen the day after to-morrow?'

She looked me straight in the face across the table. 'I can't tell you that. You'll have to take my word for it. Of course if you can't do it—if you've spent all the money or anything of that sort—I shall have to raise it elsewhere, that's all. I came to you because I knew you'd do anything you could for me—and

wouldn't ask for anything in exchange. Have you got it?'

'Yes. As a matter of fact, it's lying on deposit at the bank.'

'Then you can manage it?' Her voice and eyes were suddenly quite eager.

I tried to temporise. 'Can't you tell me what you propose to do with it? I mean to say, a thousand pounds represents a good deal of capital—to me.'

The muscles of her face twitched. I expect it was a toss-up whether she decided to say something nasty, or to make one more attempt. In the end she shook her head, slowly and rather sadly, as one who was in danger of being thoroughly disillusioned.

'I'm sorry, but I can't do it. I had a sort of idea you might be ready to help me without going into details. You see, it's a secret, and I promised not to let it out.'

There was a moment's silence. I did not want to part with that money. On the other hand, I was young, and had generous instincts, and that sort of youthful conceit which loves the *beau geste*. It would be rather fine to hand over a thousand pounds, casually, as one might give a waiter a shilling. And it seemed that she wanted it; and if I failed her it might mean she would go to Bob Sterndale, or some one to whom I would rather not be under an obligation. And I suppose half of it was hers, in a sense, since it had not been used for the original purpose.

Anyway, when she went home that night, after the theatre, she took my cheque in her purse. And I spent a good deal of that night in bed wondering what she meant to do with it, and whether I had not been something of a fool, after all.

Chapter VIII Mr. Wilks Endeavours to Explain

I

MY last two years at Cambridge were perhaps as enjoyable as any period of my life that I can remember. I felt myself developing, beginning to take a respectable place among my fellows, no longer a mere despised weakling, who could only hope to avoid destruction by the kindness and protection of others. (I suppose we moderns would call this an inferiority complex, and deduce from it no end of unpleasant occurrences in my early youth.) The fact is, it made a lot of difference when that limp in the left leg became no longer noticeable. My first year at Mike's I was ashamed of my running between the wickets, and used generally to get a man to run for me when I went in to bat. Jonny Waring got me out of that bad habit. He pointed out, very justly, that unless I took to doing things for myself I should never improve. So, being a docile youth, I started a training run before breakfast—with the result that I actually won the college thousand yards handicap at the next athletic sports meeting, with not more than about seventy yards start.

If I made anything of a figure at Mike's before the end of my time there, it was certainly due more to Jonny Waring than to any exertions of my own. He did everything he could to carry me along with him in his own triumphal progress. He and Kirwan, between them, did their best to get me put in as cox of one of the trial eights my second year, but I did not want to spend all my time steering eights. Jonny, by the way, rowed seven in the winning boat over the Adelaide course, and might have got his blue if the president himself had not been rowing at the same thwart. It would have been something of a score, in the athletic world, for St. Michael's to secure a double

blue at cricket and rowing, but Jonny was not lucky that first year.

Later, of course, cricket claimed him altogether. Even Kirwan saw that it would be hardly fair to persuade him to row in the May races now that he was playing in all the 'Varsity matches. But it was a struggle. For we were fourth on the river that year, and with Jonny to help we might very well have gone up another two places. To Kirwan the gain of a single place on the river was more than a victory at Lord's.

'There goes our last chance,' he lamented, the day Jonny took seven wickets in the second innings of the Yorkshire match. 'Not a dog's chance now for us. I shall never see Mike's get up to third now. The young men are not coming on as they should—a lot of white-livered, herring-gutted scoundrels. We haven't a single other man fit to row seven this year. And you, you Midge, never put in a single word to help me when there was yet time.'

'I want to see Oxford beaten at Lord's, for a change.'

'What? You do really take an interest in that affair, do you? Haven't you learned yet that the annual cricket match between the universities is a Social Event, at which dukes and other strange wildfowl eat chicken and drink champagne on the tops of coaches. Whereas, my good Midge, the river tests the manhood of the race. I'd like to see some of these cricketers of yours at the Pike and Eel at the end of a hard course. That would take some of the starch out of them, I fancy.'

I retorted, not without effect as I thought, by asking what some of his famous oars would look like if they were put up to face a fast bowler on a typical Lord's wicket. But Kirwan took up the challenge with all the courage of ignorance.

'Why, they'd stand up and take their knocks like men,' he said. 'And I dare say, now and then, they'd give the ball a whacking great thump—if that's what

they're supposed to do. Hang it, man, a good oar can play his part at any job you set before him. See what they do in after-life. Most of the judges on the bench have been old rowing blues.'

'I believe one or two may have been,' I demurred cautiously.

'The few who are not judges are bishops,' Kirwan went on, quite unperturbed. 'Or well on the road that way. You can't expect them all to get there in a year or two. When do we ever hear of a cricketer doing anything except play cricket? Mind you, I like Vulcan' (this was Jonny's name, naturally enough, when his story became known) 'and I don't forget he came out of his shell and helped us last year, when most men would have been sulking about that old ass Magnus. But Lord! what a waste it is to make a man like that play cricket instead of sticking to the river.'

Kirwan must have spent hours in explaining to me the difference between the glory of a rowing and a cricket blue. Of course, in those days a blue was a blue, and meant something. That very year we had, I believe, the great debate at the Union on the vexed question whether football players, Rugby and Association, should be admitted within the magic ring. Up to that time the full blue was confined to a small band of less than thirty men in any one year. Very rightly too—in the eyes of stout conservatives like Kirwan.

'We allowed these cricketers to wear it,' he used to explain. 'And then, for some obscure reason or other, the two of us invited the Athletic Club to join in and share the honour. But that does not mean that any one who represents the University in any game has the right to wear a blue coat. No, sir. Otherwise, we shall soon have the Chess Club claiming the privilege, and this new Scotch game that I hear they are playing now. Golf, is it? Thank you. And, no doubt, spillikins—in due course.'

For, strange as it may seem, we knew little of golf in those years. I remember once going into the rooms of a man of my year, Scrymgeour by name, and discovering on the mantelpiece a small dingy-looking ball, that appeared to have been hacked in several places by some blunt instrument. I asked what it was, and he replied that it was a golf ball; further, he pulled out a bundle of curious-looking clubs from a corner of the room and let me handle them. The first time I ever swung a driver (I think he called it a 'play-club' then) was in Scrymgeour's rooms, and it resulted in the downfall of a framed photograph of some forgotten beauty from behind me. But before that illuminating incident I had a notion that the game was a kind of hockey.

He took me out on to the Mike's cricket ground that Lent term, and initiated me into the mysteries of what he was pleased to call 'the St. Andrew's Swing.' And he even went so far as to introduce me, one afternoon, to a very damp and sticky place where the University Club used at that time to play the royal and ancient game. It did not seem to me then a very amusing occupation. Still, Scrymgeour inoculated me with a disease that was to conquer me later on. For which, I suppose, I owe him something.

II

There was no question about Jonny getting into the cricket team that next summer. He played in all the matches from the start, and was our most successful bowler by a long way. He would have been still more successful if Aston, who was our wicket-keeper that year, had been able to take his bowling with a little more certainty. The fact is, Jonny was never an easy bowler to take, unless you knew his ways thoroughly. That was where I came in: I may not really have been

much of a stumper, but I did know generally what sort of ball he was going to send down when he started his run up to the wicket. It had become a sort of instinct with me—I suppose from watching him so many years. Most of his deliveries whipped back pretty sharply, but one or two in every over used to go straight on, or even go a little ‘with the arm,’ as they say. Now I could almost always tell when they were going to do this, and Aston could not. I need not say that it made things a lot easier when you knew more or less what to expect. I made something of a college reputation that year by the way I took his bowling.

It was one morning just before the May races (so called because they take place in June) that I happened to be returning to college after a lecture at Christ’s and stopped for a minute to examine a poster about some forthcoming performances at the Theatre Royal. The bill-poster, as a matter of fact, was just putting them up at that moment, and I saw the placard unrolled before my eyes. It ran something like this :—

THE BATEMAN COMEDY COMPANY
SPECIAL ENGAGEMENT FOR MAY WEEK

In Oliver Goldsmith’s Famous
Comedy

SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

The Part of Kate Hardcastle by Miss Elsie Strange.

There it was, in black and white (or it may have been purple), displayed on the wall for the whole University to see. I cannot tell you how I felt when the name suddenly appeared. I believe I blushed half-way down my back, for I was always rather a modest lad, and it seemed almost like an invasion of the family privacy for my sister’s name to be blazoned abroad in this fashion. I looked anxiously round to see whether they

had reinforced this announcement with a picture, and was relieved to note nothing of the kind. Still, it was bad enough as it was. How they would chaff me when they got to know !

And how on earth, I wondered, had she contrived to get into this show ? When was it on ? I looked again at the date, and saw it was that very night. I did not know in the least what to do in order to get into touch with her, but I wanted to keep the news to myself for the present. I did not even let it out to Jonny, and he never saw the placard until the next day. But I wrote a few lines on a piece of paper that I borrowed in a friend's rooms and took the note up to the theatre to leave in the box-office. I remember they were rather stuffy about taking it, until I explained the relationship in which I stood to the leading lady of that night.

I proposed she should come and have lunch with me the next day. After a good deal of hard thinking I suggested some out-of-the-way place in St. Andrew's Street, where I thought we were not likely to be interrupted. And in the afternoon we might go down to Ditton together and see the racing. There was no cricket on, fortunately, that afternoon. And having done this, I went back to my rooms and wondered whether I should go to the theatre that evening and see the performance.

I confess I was shy about going. I was still shy about many things then, and it was not often that I went to that curious building that served us for a theatre, unless some roystering acquaintance insisted on dragging me there—and I had few roystering acquaintances. But of course I went in the end. I was intensely curious to see how Elsie would comport herself in this new company. I sat up there in the gallery (the house consisted solely of pit and gallery, the gallery not being really much above the level of the back rows of the pit) and watched eagerly for her to

come on after Tony had dragged his mother out. I was only waiting for my own sister to appear, but I am prepared to bet I was more excited at the prospect than any other man there.

That opening scene of Kate's with her father is nothing very great, and perhaps I was a little disappointed. It was not until she came on in the third act, in servant's costume, that the undergraduates, who made up the chief part of the audience, began to pay any serious attention to her. But in that scene with Marlow, who imagines her the barmaid of the supposed inn, she fairly captured them. I noticed the laughter and applause growing in volume.

'It's just the same,' I said to myself, as the curtain came down. 'She's got this crowd exactly as she used to get them at Ashe. But how on earth does she manage it?'

That was always the question. Never had I been able to see exactly where Elsie's extraordinary power came in. I could perceive a certain charm, no doubt, but I could never analyse it. Perhaps the others could not either: it was sufficient for them that it was there. Who can analyse charm, anyhow? It is much if a mere brother can even recognise its presence.

III

When she came into the room for lunch the day after, at the small hotel I had mentioned, she seemed, at a modest computation, some five years older than when I had seen her last. Every time I met Elsie again I had, as it were, to get into touch with a different personality. It was this, more than anything else, that made real intimacy with her so difficult a business. I had a lot I wanted to say to her, but hardly knew how to begin. I don't think I approached anything but trivialities until we were more than half through the meal.

‘ I wish you ’d tell me how you got into this show,’ I said at last.

‘ It ’s not much of a company, is it ? But it was the best I could do, as a beginning.’

‘ I thought it was quite good, last night. Most of it. What I wanted to know was how you induced them to take you in—and to play a part like that.’

She looked up at me quizzically from her plate.

‘ You always want to know such awkward things,’ she complained. ‘ Don’t you think I was good enough ?’

‘ I thought you were wonderful,’ I answered, truthfully enough. ‘ All the same, they say it ’s no easy matter getting a start like that.’

She considered it gravely.

‘ Perhaps not.’ And then, suddenly lighting up, as it were, in the old way, ‘ But, you know, you helped a good deal this time.’

‘ What do you mean ?’ I was momentarily perplexed.

‘ I have been wondering since whether I had better pay you back, or give you a share in the concern. Shall I turn myself into a company ? Rather fun, I think. Don’t look so astonished. I ’m not at all mad, really. But you gave me a cheque for a thousand that night when we saw the Bancrofts—you remember—and I have always thought you deserved something good for it. Most men would have pestered me a lot more than you did about what I meant to do with it.’

‘ Oh ! So this was the idea, was it ?’

Elsie was in a mocking vein. ‘ Shall I tell him ? When one explains things like this all the romance evaporates at once. Sad, but so it is. No ! I did not put your thousand (which, of course, was more than half mine) into this company. Not without doctoring it first. You see, I hate throwing money away. It was Bob who wanted the money.’

I believe I made a grimace. ‘ Bob Sterndale ? What on earth did he want with your money ?’

‘Bob conjures with money. That’s his trade. He performed some quite interesting tricks with mine. I think he doubled it in about four weeks. Or so he told me. He does something in the American market, I believe they call it. Do you know what that means?’

‘Not exactly. But it’s just gambling, you know. He’ll probably lose just as much or more next time.’

But Elsie was quite sure he would do nothing of the kind.

‘You don’t know Bob, I can see. He’s one of those sleek, well-groomed men who always do make money. You can tell by looking at them. I told him he could do what he liked with the rest of the money if he let me have my thousand back to put into this thing. You see, they wanted a little money, and also, between ourselves, they wanted a Draw.’

‘Good! And you gave them both.’

She laughed merrily. ‘I believe I did, so you needn’t try to be nasty about it. We’ve done quite fairly this last few months. And Bob says he has still got fifteen hundred of mine in hand.’

‘I see. It sounds like a widow’s cruse of oil. I suppose there are some people who go on and on and never back the wrong horse. But most of them do make mistakes. And when they do I believe they often find them expensive.’

‘Poor Bob! No doubt he’s doomed to bankruptcy in the long run, but in the meanwhile he has been—rather useful. You see, he wouldn’t like to make a mistake with my money.’ And she finished with a look of quite inimitable roguery.

So we ate our lunch, and went down to Ditton Corner, and saw the Mike’s boat go down a place, which was rather disheartening, but to be expected, as Kirwan had been explaining to us all the way down. For we had run across him just as we started, and of course I had stopped to introduce him. Then nothing

would satisfy him but coming with us. I had never before regarded Kirwan in the light of a 'ladies' man,' but he came out uncommonly strong that afternoon.

It really was as good as a play to see him laying himself out to entertain. He was quite amusing, too, in his way ; posing as the elderly man of vast experience, a little disillusioned with life, recognising the weaknesses but also the virtues of the simple undergraduate.

'You see, Miss Strange, I have no right at all to be here, strictly speaking. It must be a full three years since I took my degree. But I find it difficult to tear myself away. One gets fond of the old place ; and then they employ me to teach in a small way ; and I coach a boat or two when they want help. This year, it is true, they wanted some one with a bigger reputation. A blue, in fact. And they got him. You will see the result when the Mike's first boat comes round that corner.'

He pointed dramatically to Grassy Corner, on his right hand.

'I thought you laid our deterioration down to the fact that we had no one fit to row seven,' I suggested.

'Silence, Midge !' He checked himself in full swing to apologise. 'Excuse me, Miss Strange, but we have to use these opprobrious terms to keep your brother in order. He is small in stature, but has a great spirit. It is true that I had hoped to avert disaster for one more year—even perhaps to go up a place or two—if I could have persuaded one of our young men to resume his place at Number Seven. A sturdy young fellow, of the best rural type. One Waring.'

'Jonny Waring. Oh, but of course I know all about him. Is he down here now, do you think ?' And Elsie became at once doubly animated, so that Kirwan went off cheerfully to see if he could find him while we watched the Second Division paddle down to the start.

Before the end of that afternoon Elsie was holding a regular court there on the lawn at Ditton. Any one with whom I had any acquaintance at all hung about until I saw them, or came up boldly to be introduced, according to their temperaments. Once there, they generally stayed ; like flies in treacle. But Jonny Waring, apparently, was not to be found.

IV

I was certainly popular enough during the next few days, while the Bateman Comedy Company was still performing at the Theatre Royal. I did not go to the play that evening, but the next day there were stories of a tremendous reception that had been given her when she came on. I believe the management—always a little timorous—were very nearly closing the house for fear of a riot. All sorts of strange folk came up to my rooms on all sorts of pretexts. Secretaries of Ball Committees asked if I would care to have tickets. She did manage to attend the Mike's ball, as there was an interval of two or three days in which the company had no engagement. You should have seen her on that occasion. I dare say, in a sense, it was the triumph of her life. She has had others since, no doubt, but there is a quality about youthful adoration that is apt to fade in maturer years.

Kirwan was the most prominent of my new friends. He had an opinion of himself, had Kirwan, and was quite convinced that Elsie liked his diatribes on the decay of rowing and the neglect of true principles that had brought Mike's down two places on the river. He got me to persuade her to come to tea in his rooms ; and at the ball, a day or two later, he was apt to complain if any one else sat out a dance with her. Jonny and I had been present at the tea, and Jonny had been even more reserved than usual. He was always one

of those men who seem quite indifferent to the necessity of making conversation. But at the ball they could get alone, and it was different. They had one talk in the Fellows' Garden that must have lasted half an hour. Or so Kirwan said. In fact he did not hesitate to put it at three-quarters, at the very least.

'Your friend the Village Blacksmith is taking a trifle too much upon himself,' he said gloomily.

'I expect they have been talking over old times,' I explained, not unamused. It interested me to watch Elsie in her ways with these young men. I flattered myself I had made some study of her methods. She generally began with all of them in much the same fashion, very frank and friendly and delightful. For a few days each one of them thought that she really preferred his society to that of any rival. And then, after the due period of paradise, came the creeping doubt and mental torment of indecision. Did she like him after all as much as he had imagined, seeing that she was now to all appearance just as frank and friendly with another? That little dash of purgatory, after a momentary taste of paradise, was what commonly clinched the business, I said to myself.

I do not suppose for a moment that I should have found any one of my then male acquaintance prepared to back me in these views. Every one of them, I suspect, thought he knew a lot more about my sister's real nature than I did. I was only a brother, and brothers are proverbially a blind and stupid race, unlikely to perceive any of the finer shades of a character. Or perhaps it is that the lustre of the pearl has become dulled through custom and use. It is always with them: no longer can it strike them with a sudden awe of admiration, like something fresh from heaven.

Even Jonny was half inclined to range himself with these. When I chaffed him a little about what Kirwan had said, and hinted, I dare say, just a little of what I

have written in the paragraph above, he thought fit to rebuke me as one of no understanding.

‘It’s curious,’ he said, ‘but I don’t believe you know your sister’s character in the least bit.’

‘Possibly not. As you all say so, I suppose there must be something in the accusation.’

Jonny’s brows contracted a moment.

‘When you say “you all,” what precisely do you mean?’

I temporised.

‘She has what you might call a—circle.’

Then Jonny burst out into a sudden freshet of speech.

‘A circle! She has all the world—if she chooses to take it. Do you know what it has meant to each one of us to have been brought up at Ashe? I mean to say, she gave us all something—a sort of ideal. Myself, and Percy Cudden, and—yes, even young Hicks. He must have felt it too: I know he did. Of course, we were all in love with her. Who could help it? It must have done us all a thundering lot of good.’

I doubt if I had ever heard Jonny speak with so much conviction on any subject before. He said it all as though it were the most natural and indeed obvious thing in the world. Of the two I was decidedly the more embarrassed. I caught myself up saying something fatuous about her feeling proud if she only knew what he thought. That was not the right way to put it, on calm reflection.

But what a remarkable thing it was, the way Elsie hypnotised every male creature with whom she came in contact. They surrounded her, competing for the slightest sign of favour: she might throw them some poor bone (as with Percy Cudden) and then snatch it untasted from their very jaws. Would they protest? Not in the very least: they would merely resume their places in the circle, looking up at this marvellous creature with dumb, adoring eyes. Could I imagine

Percy harbouring any resentment in his simple soul? No! It might hurt like the devil, but I suspect he cherished the wound.

And what did she herself really think of them all, I wondered. Did she care in the least for any one of them—for Percy, or young Hicks, or Bob Sterndale, or the parson Kelway, or for Jonny Waring? Did she care at all for me, if it came to that? Or were we all just useful, on occasion, in our various capacities, and so to be encouraged—up to a point? I looked at Jonny. Upon my word, I believe she liked him better than all the rest—for himself. Of course, some of the others might be more useful.

‘No!’ I spoke again after a long pause. ‘I dare say you are perfectly right. I think Elsie is a bit of an enigma.’

He raised his eyebrows, as though he would have liked to hint that I thought nothing of the kind.

‘Old Kirwan rather amused me, that was all.’ I went floundering on. ‘He seemed to wonder that you had anything to say to her. I told him you were probably recalling the past.’

‘I was trying to help her a little.’

‘Help her? In what way?’ I confess I was rather surprised at his choosing that word.

Jonny wrinkled his brows, collecting himself before plunging into a difficult explanation.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Faith, I suppose you would call it. You see, she’s all loose from her bearings, like the rest of us. I mean to say, what was good enough for the Canon and Miss Mooney won’t do for us. We should like to hold on to it, but we can’t: our religion has simply got to be modified again. Call it modified, or purified, it doesn’t much matter which. I believe in the Christian religion—up to a certain point. All I say is, it’s not the slightest good until you see what it really means. One has to have one’s eyes opened.

Saul on the way to Damascus, you know. Oh, every teacher has felt it. They talk of conversion, of regeneration, of a sudden light from Heaven, and so on. It's all the same thing.'

It was rather difficult to follow him, but I did my best. 'I didn't know Elsie worried much about that sort of thing,' I put in.

He looked at me with a sort of pity.

'That's just it. Sometimes we can't see a thing because it's too close to us.'

I had nothing to say.

'I believe you've always had an idea that she's a sort of butterfly. She's nothing of the kind. She may be mercurial, but there's a big streak of melancholy in her disposition. And you must remember she's been through a good deal lately. First the Canon, and then Miss Mooney. She's been a bit frightened, you see. A lot of us do get a bit frightened, when we come up against death for the first time. I had to explain to her what death really was.'

'Well, what is it?'

'Just nothing at all—to the immortal part of us. No more than going into the next room. It's not Miss Mooney or the Canon who lie there in Ashe churchyard: it's just the material they were using when they were on this sphere. Two suits of left-off clothes. You hold that, as much as I do?'

I considered. 'I should like to, but what reason is there for holding that belief any more than the ordinary Christian faith—that we rise from the dead at the last day? Or than the materialistic creed—that we just go out like the snuff of a candle, our soul perishing (if indeed we have a soul) with the worn-out body?'

'Among other things—that they come back and tell us they are as much alive as ever. More so, in fact.'

'I see. How did Elsie take your ghost stories?'

Jonny smiled, not in the least perturbed. 'Frankly,

she was a good deal more sensible over them than you have been—hitherto.'

'You mean she was more credulous?'

'My dear chap, the only credulous people are the scientists. They will believe any cock-and-bull story the opponents of spiritualism bring out. Look here, I'm going to take you in hand seriously. Wilks and I have been talking over your case, and we came to the conclusion——'

'Wilks? What has he to do with it?'

'Our respected Senior Tutor is a little shy of letting every one know it, but he happens to have been one of the founders of the S.P.R. Perhaps you don't know what that is?'

'I believe I have heard you mention it before. Psychical Research, isn't it?'

'Right. Well, Wilks practically started it. But he doesn't exactly blazon the fact abroad over the University. There are so many of your sort about that he might get a reputation for insanity.'

'I can quite understand that.'

'He has to choose his audience carefully. But he has a few disciples. There's this fellow Germain, for instance, on this staircase. And Wingfield, and Hutt, and myself and half a dozen others. He thought you might like to come and hear him lecture, or give a discourse, or whatever you like to call it. Friday next is the date, in Germain's rooms. It's not far to go.'

'Certainly. I'll come, of course, if you like. With pleasure.'

'That's right. I told him you were quite reasonable, really. Mind, I don't say dear old Wilks is a heaven-sent speaker. He's not.'

'Agreed. Even in this University, where good speakers are scarce, I should think he was one of the worst.'

‘ Quite so. Also, he ’s as nervous as a cat. But he generally has something to say worth saying.’

‘ Well, I ’ll come. What time ? ’

‘ After hall. I ’ll come and fetch you along.’

‘ And you ’re not going to have any of your mediums and séances and things ? ’

He laughed. That was one thing about Jonny : he did not mind being chaffed about these matters—at any rate by me. Whether he would have taken it quite as calmly from any one else I cannot say.

‘ Not this time. That may come later—if you ’re good.’

He contented himself with that, and left me alone to think it over. My first impression was one of surprise and rather amused contempt. Fancy Wilks taking part in this movement ! Our Senior Tutor—not, of course, that a senior tutor or even a master of a college is necessarily a man of overpowering intellect. Still, I had rather a high opinion of Wilks, and not only because he knew more about Latin inscriptions than perhaps any one else at Cambridge. I had always considered him a sensible fellow. Then again, Jonny himself was a sufficiently hard-headed young man, in ordinary circumstances : how on earth had he allowed himself to get involved in this coil ? Looking at the matter from my then knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of the subject, I confess I found it difficult to explain.

v

And that evening in Germain’s rooms, a day or two later, found me in a very cold and critical mood. I liked Germain himself well enough, as a harmless and quiet man to have on one’s own staircase, but I did not really know him at all well. And I had the ordinary undergraduate’s distrust of the unusual. One could not be intimate with a man who was said to speak on

Sunday evenings to earnest bands of townees on Parker's Piece, and to hold prayer-meetings in his rooms. Then there was Wingfield. What I knew of Wingfield I liked, but he was undeniably a bit queer : a medical student who was said to have taken up the science of mesmerism, and had made experiments on some members of the college. Hutt I knew fairly well : he was our musical scholar, and played the organ in chapel. The others were chiefly sober, quiet reading men, with whom I had little in common, though one of them, M'Cormick, was a classical scholar in the year above mine. And then, of course, there was Wilks himself.

Wilks must have been the most nervous orator who ever took upon himself the duty of delivering lectures. I believe he positively hated having to speak to more than a single person at a time. And no one there wanted to take precedence, or shove himself forward. I suppose, with the exception of Jonny and possibly Wingfield, we were a tolerably shy crowd. So we sat round, more or less in a circle, for a considerable time, making a few desultory remarks and feeling (at least I speak for myself) unutterably bored. At last Jonny had to take the matter in hand himself. He got up and went across to Wilks, who was sitting by the open window, pulling his beard and muttering inanities about cricket to his neighbour, and Wilks, suddenly galvanised into action, pulled out a handful of papers from an inside pocket, and began.

It was positively painful to listen to him. He displayed all his worst habits, at their most distressing pitch. He hammered and stammered, and got caught up in certain phrases which kept on recurring with an irritating persistency. And yet, through it all, I was aware (and I suppose most of the others felt it too) that the man really had a message to deliver, if he could only get it through. He began by speaking of Science

and the doctrine of Man's Survival of Death. Modern materialistic science treated the subject as hardly capable of argument, but it seemed to some of us that certain discoveries had recently been made which might gradually revolutionise our attitude towards the Unseen World and our own position therein. (When I got back to my rooms that night I put these few notes together, trying to arrange them in some sort of sequence, more as an act of mental gymnastic than for any other reason.) One of the obstacles with which we had to contend was the fact that the thesis of survival had been so often defended from the moral and emotional standpoint rather than from the scientific. He wished to debate the matter on the ground of observations and experiments. This did not mean that he did not himself believe in the resurrection of Christ. In fact, he adhered to the view of Paley, absurd as it might sound in these days. His twelve men of known probity, testifying that Christ did in some way manifest Himself to the disciples after bodily life was extinct, were not lightly to be swept aside as of no account. In some way, he had no doubt that Christ did so manifest Himself. And, in his view, not Christ alone, but others—even at the present day—were doing the same.

I think this was the most important point he made during his long, rambling, and involved discourse. But I admit my attention wandered, and I lost the thread of a good deal, and at the best I was never a good writer of *précis*. I remember he said something about the inquiry into survival being comparatively a new study. We need not go out of our way to suppose that the subject had been scientifically examined for ages, and that the highest intellects of mankind had failed to come to any conclusion on it. After all, what abstract speculation was being done, say, five thousand years ago, and what proportion of the world's history

of thought was comprised in that miserable fraction of time? In other branches of science we see every day problems being solved that were for ages considered as beyond the power of human analysis. And this particular problem depends and arises out of the study of physiology, a new branch of science, and of psychology, a newer branch still. This spiritual life of ours, what has modern science taught us of it that Plato, for example, did not know? They assert that it is, or seems to be, in abeyance during infancy: that it is warped in madness: that it decays at the approach of old age. Plato, too, pointed out that the musician cannot play sweetly on a damaged lyre.

And then he went on at length on matters where I found it difficult to follow, about recent discoveries on the subject of telepathy, and secondary personalities. And he finished by completely losing himself in a magnificent but involved parallel, out of which I could make nothing.

Afterwards there was a discussion, chiefly monopolised by Wingfield, who wanted to air some theory of his own about hypnotic influence, and was especially anxious to experiment on myself. I escaped with some difficulty, and wrote down these notes while they were still arguing away in Germain's rooms. I did not see Jonny till the next day. And when he asked me what I had thought of it all I had not much to say. It all seemed to me so nebulous, vague, unsatisfactory.

'I take it you think it's worth a little examination?' he said, in conclusion.

I believe I assented. But I was not really much interested, even then. Most minds, I reflected, had a weak spot somewhere: with him, and Wilks, and perhaps one or two others in that gathering, it seemed to be this matter of survival. Yes! I suppose it might be worth looking into further—if one got a chance—and if it did not bring one into close quarters with

too many unwholesome cranks. Jonny Waring and Wilks were well enough, but I could not stand the species with long hair and wide, staring eyes.

Chapter IX Ending in a Temporary Blaze of Glory

I

My friend Kirwan, as you may imagine, was inclined to be scornful about Wilks and his infatuation with spirits. Or rather (for everybody liked Wilks) he turned round and sought for some one else on whom he might plant his arrows of sarcasm. Kirwan, of course, had gone out in Natural History or some tripos of that sort which, as we were careful to explain to him, was thoroughly deadening to all the finer senses. He did not, in effect, get much out of his attacks, except a fine volley of chaff on occasion. Jonny was not at all the sort of man to be 'ragged' for his opinions without retorting. And I suppose even I myself was no longer quite such easy game as in my first or second year.

'Yes, I can understand a fellow like our Midge,' Kirwan would say. 'He's just the sort of chap who takes naturally to strange games like this. You could see he was born to be a crank. But I confess Vulcan puzzles me. Always thought him a hard-headed, sensible fellow, I must say. It must be this obsession with cricket that has ruined him. If he'd only stuck to rowing he'd have been all right.'

And then we would turn and rend him, pointing out with some force that the practice of rowing ought to be abolished in the universities. It was clear from statistics that no form of exercise hitherto known had a worse effect on the intellect. No! it was not the smallest use his throwing names of distinguished lawyers at our heads. What made a distinguished

lawyer? The faculty of seeing one side of a question only, and behaving as though the other did not exist. Bishops? Did he lay so much stress on bishops? With regret we had to point out that the study of theology proved almost as deadening to the intellect as that of Natural Science. We pricked and goaded the poor fellow till he was almost in a frenzy. His hair used to get more and more ruffled as the argument proceeded, for he had a trick of running his fingers through it when unable to think of the right word. We had some fine talks about the beginning of my third year, generally up in my rooms. Wingfield used to come in, and Germain, and sometimes Fagge.

‘Well, why don’t you do something?’ shouted the exasperated victim at last. ‘Here I am. I may be a fool, as you fellows seem to think, but I believe I am tolerably honest. All I say is, show me something.’

‘He wants a sign, like the people in the New Testament,’ said Wingfield.

‘I think I have the right to demand something. Hang it all, a man must use his common sense. So far as I have found hitherto, this world is governed by certain laws. You maintain that these laws can be abrogated. Very well. Abrogate a few. Show me!’

And, of course, that let in Wingfield at once, who was always ready and willing to exhibit his powers. He wanted to try them on me, but I refused. Then he got to work on Germain, and he really did seem to get Germain under the influence, and proceeded to perform all the usual experiments, such as suggesting that he could not feel anything when a pin was run into his arm, and so on.

I think Kirwan was rather impressed, though there was nothing particularly novel about the performance, even then. In fact we had had an exhibition of the same sort in the Corn Exchange, I think, some few weeks before, by some travelling professor. But of

course he made out that there was nothing to show that performances of that sort were genuine. Germain belonged to our gang (as he rudely put it) anyway. Probably a confederate.

Then Wingfield insisted on trying his passes on Kirwan himself, and there was a long and determined attempt to carry out the process. But Kirwan emerged undefeated, though flushed and becoming a little incoherent. But there was one curious incident, which rather startled me at first. That was just when Germain was being brought round (I never had any doubt that he really had been quite unconscious), and Wingfield was fanning him with a folded newspaper.

'By Jove!' he said, suddenly, just before he came to himself, 'what a funny old woman!'

'Oh? Where?' said Wingfield, going on with his fanning methodically.

He pointed in the air to a spot just over my head. 'All in black. Funny little side curls she's got. Trying to speak. Can't you hear her? Talking away like anything. Strange—she wants Strange—wants to tell him something.'

And then he woke up, as it were, quite suddenly, and professed to remember nothing of what had passed. When the others had gone, it occurred to me to get out my old photograph album (every one kept photograph albums in those days) and extract a *carte de visite* of old Miss Mooney that had been taken in Leicester about a year before she died. I took it over to Germain's rooms when the others had all gone.

'Look here,' I said, 'I wish you'd tell me if you've ever seen this old woman.'

He looked at it for some time, with his brows furrowed. At last he spoke.

'Not that I know of.' He shook his head. 'Just at first I thought I might have. It seemed—sort of familiar.'

That was all I could get, and at that time I thought it very little. Still, it was curious, and it interested me. It interested Jonny too. He, of course, was absolutely certain that Mooney was trying to get at me, in order to tell me something of the greatest importance. I ought to try and find out what it was at once. But I did nothing just then. The fact was, I disliked meddling with the business at all. This idea of the dead returning to earth and talking with the living is a difficult matter to swallow at first. Our religions have become incrustated with so tremendous a body of prejudice and superstition on the subject of death that a great many of us never will be persuaded to discuss the matter. The Funeral Service, the ashy and discoloured corpse screwed down into a wooden box and hidden away among a heap of untidy mounds, or perhaps sliding out of our sight behind the clanging doors of a furnace, the dingy black clothes and mournful faces of the relatives—all these things are sufficient to discourage any one who tries for the first time to visualise death as a pleasant change that makes no essential difference to the personality.

‘It may be all right,’ I used to say. ‘Perhaps it is. I don’t know. But I don’t believe, somehow, that we were *meant* to communicate with them.’

This used to make Jonny quite angry. He thought it a sort of cowardice, as indeed I suppose it was. What numbers of times I have seen him marching up and down my room—he always liked to walk up and down when heated in argument—every now and then swinging round sharply to face me when he thought he had made an unanswerable point. And I need not say that this happened pretty frequently. What had I to say about the Bible? Was there no communication with the dead there? How about Saul and Samuel and the Witch of Endor? How about Christ Himself? One had only to read the Bible over again after

studying the ordinary phenomena of what was called Spiritualism, to become convinced that Christ was the greatest medium who had ever been.

I did not like this way of putting it. Robert Browning had seen to it that the word 'medium' was already hopelessly discredited. Every sensible person regarded a medium and a cheat as synonymous terms.

Jonny gave an impatient jerk of the head.

'I can't help that. Perhaps in another twenty or thirty years they won't. Don't run away down the side-track of accusing us of blasphemy. Every new truth that conflicts with an older opinion is blasphemy. One of these days the Church will come round to Spiritualism instead of doing all it can to discredit it. I've been talking this over with Wilks.'

I laughed. 'I can see you have.'

'Yes, I dare say. I tried to get him to preach a sermon on it in chapel. Might wake people up a bit. On the Psychic Circle of the Apostles (Peter, James, and John being the inner ring). On the miracles and the close observance of psychic law to be noted in them. On the Transfiguration, and all the other accompanying phenomena. I tell you, there's no end that comes out in quite a different light if you once begin to read with your eyes open.'

II

But it was my last year, and there was a lot to be got through before the end of it. For one thing, I was keener than ever on cricket that summer. The Mike's team was a good deal better than it had been for a long time, and we were naturally anxious to bring it up somewhere near the top before we had to leave the work to other hands.

Jonny, of course, was remarkably useful when the authorities did not want him for something more important. He was about at his best that summer, as

you can see by looking up the old Cambridge records, and for our college team he was a perfect terror to batsmen. He went through some of the sides opposed to us like a knife through butter. And, though I say it, I had learned by that time to back him up behind the wickets pretty well. After all, I had been practising with him the better part of my life.

Outside this one shred of talent I admit freely that I was only a very moderate performer. Physically, though I had grown a bit lately, I was still a sufficiently poor specimen. When Jonny and I happened to be batting together, we must have made a curious contrast. Jonny was a hitter, if ever there was one, whereas when I tried to hit (if I ever did) the effect was so ridiculous that it really did not seem worth while. I never could get the ball to travel any distance in front of the wicket. So I was almost forced to concentrate on defence, and by degrees I did become rather difficult to dislodge. They sometimes called me 'Scotton' in those days when they wanted to be sarcastic. For the college team these tactics paid well enough that year. Our eleven was chiefly composed of stalwart young fellows who did not care overmuch about form, but liked to go for the bowling whole-heartedly, and score while they had a chance. A man who could keep up his wicket while the others hit or got out, had his use.

But I can honestly say that, towards the end of my third year at Cambridge, I had no illusions about my standing as a cricketer. I loved the game, and liked my own position in the field above everything. I had no particular ambition, except for the glory of Mike's, and to take most of my catches when they came along (especially those on the leg side), and not to miss too many opportunities when the batsman just dragged his foot over the crease. But it never occurred to me that I was any particular good at the game. I had picked up a useful wrinkle or two in the early days at Ashe,

and I had enjoyed opportunities for a lot of practice with Jonny—but that was all. It was incredible that a man of my history could ever make a player of any real use.

It was one evening in June, just after the match against Burnett's team—he generally called it Gentlemen of England, though it was hardly worthy of so sounding a title—that Jonny came into my rooms, as he generally did after a match to talk over the events of the day. We had not done very well : in fact, we had done much worse than any one would have thought likely, looking at the teams on paper. And there was no doubt our failure had been chiefly due to Aston. He had never been a really class wicket-keeper, but this year he had been sometimes decidedly poor. It was not so much that he missed a lot of chances as that he always looked as though he were unsafe. It makes a lot of difference to the general work of a team if the man behind the stumps takes all the bowling easily and quietly, without any fuss, looking as though he knew all about it, and was not in the least likely to make a serious mistake. That sort of thing inspires confidence all round, and in any game confidence is worth half the battle.

Jonny said this, or something very like it, when he came in that evening.

‘ I like Aston myself,’ he said. ‘ So do most of us. But he ’s not nearly as good as he was last year. And he wasn’t exactly first-class then. We shall have to make a change, I think.’

‘ I saw him miss two sitters off your bowling to-day,’ I admitted. ‘ Still, those swingers that go with the arm take a lot of watching.’

‘ I know. One doesn’t expect miracles. Bowling would be easy work if no chances were ever dropped. But they ’ve been talking about it. Burnett—well ! you know old Burnett—he said it wasn’t giving me a

fair chance. Of course that's rot. But Acklom seemed to think much the same.' Acklom, by the way, was captain that year. 'He asked me what my own opinion was. Had I any suggestion to make?'

'Well, had you any?' I asked casually, thinking perhaps he had got Laffan of Trinity in his mind, who was a freshman from Eton and had come up with a bit of a reputation.

'I said I thought they might give you a trial,' said Jonny, as though it were the most ordinary and obvious thing in the world.

It gave me the shock of my life. I am not exaggerating when I say that for a moment I felt exactly as though some jester had suddenly turned a jet of icy water straight on to my back through a hose-pipe. In my wildest moments I had never thought that such a proposition could come within the bounds of possibility.

'Give me a trial,' I repeated limply. 'Me?'

'That's what I said. Burnett thought so too. He backed me up nobly.' Jonny laughed a little at the recollection. 'I regret to say that Acklom did not seem exactly to place you when I first mentioned the name. We had to explain who you were. But Burnett's the man. He came out strong, if you like. Said he'd known you all your life, and had his eye on you for this job the last two years. Even went so far as to hint you were a pretty useful bat, at a pinch. Don't know where he got that from. Never seen you make a run in his life, I expect. But Acklom's not an obstinate goat, like old Magnus. He took it all in, like milk. I'm prepared to bet you'll hear from him in a day or two.'

And Jonny rubbed his hands, as pleased as could be. I am sure he was a lot better pleased than I was myself.

To tell the honest truth, I felt more frightened for the moment than complimented. I have always suffered from a too vivid imagination, ever ready to

picture disaster, and I had immediately visualised myself, a poor, shivering object, issuing from the pavilion at Lord's amid the hushed expectation of thousands, and commencing the league-long journey to the distant wickets pitched away there in the centre of the ground. Suppose I had to go in last wicket, with four to make to win, and failed miserably to stop the first ball! Or suppose I had been sent in earlier, with instructions to keep up my wicket at all costs, and had promptly run out the most dangerous bat on our side.

I gave an involuntary shiver. Still—a man can only do his best, and take his chance.

'Do you really think he will?' I asked. 'What ought I to say if he does? I've never spoken to the beggar in my life.'

'Well, you needn't speak to him now. He'll merely send you a chit, in the ordinary way, I suppose. Asking you to be up there at the proper time, ready for the fray. I expect he will want you for the Sussex match.'

I heaved a sigh, running through the great names I might have to meet on the field. And then, I admit, a wave of exultation warmed me for a moment. I might be venturing outside my class, but it was something to have been asked to play for the 'Varsity team—even if I never did a thing, and was never invited again. In a sense, my name would go down to history.

'Well, I suppose we can go together,' I said. 'That's something, anyway.'

Jonny laughed outright. 'No use trying to pretend you're as nervous as all that,' he said. 'However, I'll nurse you a bit at first. Bear in mind that they only want you for keeping wicket: anything else you happen to bring off is so much to the good. See?'

It was all very well for Jonny, who never had any more nerves than a rhinoceros. But I am bound to say he did a lot to hearten me up, from time to time.

III

And when it actually arrived, the ordeal was not so very terrible, after all. These ordeals seldom are so bad as we imagine they are going to be. I suspect many a man, in old days, who all but fainted when he first beheld the grim-faced executioner standing with his hand poised idly on the lever of the rack, found his courage return almost miraculously when the actual torture began. (What a fuss to make about a mere cricket match, you will think !) And this was only a trial event, anyway : except for my own sake, no one would be likely to care much if I missed half a dozen chances, and ran out every other member of the team.

I was a bit nervous, of course. I thought Acklom regarded me a little curiously when I turned up in the dressing-room for the first time, as though I were certainly rather smaller than he had quite expected. (Not that I was so very short at that time, but I might have been a few inches broader with advantage.) However, I had quite a good match, though I only managed to make five runs in the two innings. But Jonny was at the very top of his form that day. He took seven wickets in the first innings and five in the second, at an average cost of less than eight runs each. All of which, as well as my own modest contribution to the score, and the four catches I contrived to hold, may be found by the curious in the pages of *Wisden* for that date, or in *Lillywhite's Annual*, or even in the back numbers of the sporting press.

So, for that matter, may the 'Varsity match itself, with all the dry particulars of the score. What *Wisden* and *Lillywhite* cannot tell you, however, is how the game appeared to us who took part in it. I may as well tell you that, except for a quarter of an hour or so on the last day, I really rather enjoyed it. Most of the time we seemed to have the match so well in hand that

there was no very pressing anxiety for the smaller fry to do anything out of the common. The only fear we had was that there might be a draw if we stayed in too long. The Oxford first innings occupied the better part of the first day—up till nearly six o'clock, in fact—in which time they made no more than a hundred and eighty runs on a fast wicket. I don't blame them altogether, for Jonny was in fine form again, and they had to bring out all they knew to keep up their wickets at the pavilion end. He was bowling from the nursery end, and making them come away down the hill just enough to worry the batsman—except for about one in four which managed in some curious fashion to whip back up the hill. But the majority of his wickets were from snicks behind the stumps that day. I got three myself, and the slips four more between them. So that it was with a comfortable feeling of having done something to earn my place that I awaited my own innings the second day.

I have heard Acklom blamed for trying to hustle matters too much that second day. I think perhaps he took his opponents a shade too cheaply after that first innings, and was only afraid that the weather might break the third day and rob us of a certain victory. At any rate, when we had topped their score for the loss of only four wickets by lunch-time, the rest of the team received orders to make runs quickly or get out. And, as not infrequently happens in these circumstances, most of us chose the latter alternative. The innings was over by half-past three, with Cambridge leading by no more than a hundred and thirty runs. Still, that looked enough. Some of us thought there was a decent chance of finishing the match that night.

'Fire them out if you possibly can,' said Acklom, as we took the field for the second time. 'I don't like the look of that sky. There'll be a thunder-storm to-night, and then God knows what the wicket will be like.'

And it looked uncommonly lowering most of that

evening. Things went fairly well with us at the start. We had two wickets for thirteen, both clean bowled by Jonny, and then something went wrong. The next pair played a fine, plucky game, and made the stand of the match. I heard afterwards that Jonny had strained himself slightly in the side: it was evident enough that most of the fire had suddenly gone out of his bowling. Acklom had to take him off, and none of our other men ever looked like being really difficult. Instead of our 'firing them out' that afternoon, they knocked off the arrears by half-past five, and then began to put on runs at a considerable pace. The net result of it was that we managed, by sheer hard work, to get four more wickets down that night, and to check the run-getting a little, but they were something more than a hundred on when stumps were drawn, for no more than six wickets. And that night the thunder-storm came. I could hear the rain lashing down as I lay in bed, and it did not comfort me in the least. If we had anything like a hot sun the next morning, that wicket would be all but impossible.

At first it was deceptive, as a Lord's wicket so often is. A little soft, perhaps, but if anything rather easier than the day before. I think any fair-minded person will admit that we had all the worst of the luck that match. Oxford had the benefit of that first twenty minutes or so before the ball began to 'do things,' and they made the best of their opportunities. It was simple enough getting them out afterwards, but by that time the mischief was done. We were left to get one hundred and forty-odd runs to win on a hopelessly damaged pitch.

It sounds easy enough, seeing that we had quite a fair batting side that year. But Oxford had one left-hand bowler, who was a perfect terror on a sticky wicket, and he had our men guessing almost from the start. As soon as the effects of the roller had worn off young

Shelmerdine got to work. A medium pace bowler, with a nice, easy action, he did not get a tremendous amount of work on the ball, but he always did enough to make it beat the bat if you were not remarkably careful. And that day you simply could not tell what the ball was going to do. Our first four men all fell to him. And, what was worse, they looked beaten all the time : not one of them inspired the least confidence in his ability to stop the rot. We had four men out for forty runs, and those had been scratched up in a very shaky manner. Then came a bit of a stand.

I confess I began to feel most uncomfortably nervous about that time. I did not swell with pride in the least at the thought of the chance that might come my way, to distinguish my humble self for years by standing in the breach when all our most famous performers had failed. I fear I was not exactly the stuff of which heroes are made. I sat and shivered, hot as it was that day, waiting until my own turn should come, and I should have to advance down those steps nervously buttoning my right-hand glove, and set out on that terrible journey to the wicket.

Acklom went in fifth wicket, and his face looked unnaturally pale. He passed quite close to me—so close that I could see his lips twitch as he made a strong effort to control himself. Acklom was our stylist. A really graceful bat, who had made some fine scores that year, but all on hard wickets. Give him a good fast ground, a medium to fast bowler, and he was perfectly happy. There was not a man in the team with a prettier off-drive. But he never had liked the sort of stuff Shelmerdine was serving up that day. And I don't blame him either.

He faced his first ball, and shaped to push it to forward short leg. Shelmerdine was pitching them just an awkward length on the leg stump, or even a little off it, and as often as not they broke back (I told you

he was a left-hander) and took the off. This first one all but bowled him : it broke too much as a matter of fact, and missed the off stump by inches. And the next one was much the same, an inch or two more to the off when it pitched. Acklom played forward again, and cocked the ball up dangerously near point. You could see he was hopelessly out of it against that stuff : he simply did not know what to do with it.

‘Scratching about like an old hen,’ a man near me muttered disgustedly. It was all very well, but I doubt if he would have done any better himself. Then I saw who it was. No other than our old friend Burnett.

‘Hullo,’ he said, cheerily enough, seeing me. ‘Not much of a show this, eh ? Rotten luck for our side, all the same. You in soon ?’

‘Next but one. Jonny Waring next, and then me.’ I did not add that my knees felt as if they would refuse their office in about two more minutes.

‘Waring, eh ? Well, he might do it, that fellow. He’s got no nerves worth mentioning, anyway. And he can hit. You want a hitter for that beggar. Not the smallest use staying at home and trying to play him. Look, that’s got him.’

And, just as he spoke, we saw Acklom gracefully reaching forward and placing the ball in the bowler’s hands.

Burnett sighed.

‘Lord help us, fancy playing forward to that, on this wicket. The ball sat up and looked at him. Well, well. And now Waring, you say ?’

‘Yes, Jonny’s next.’

‘Six for seventy-four. Sixty-seven runs to get, and four men to get ’em. Doesn’t look healthy to me, but it might be done—with pluck. Who comes along after you ?’

‘Stone and Baggallay. Stone sometimes makes runs.’ I spoke hopefully, but in my heart I felt that

we were doomed. Baggallay was merely a bowler, who had never made more than a dozen in his life, and I could not see Stone doing anything much with that left-hand stuff of Shelmerdine's.

'H'm. Seems to me, my lad, that you'll have to carry the responsibility yourself. Feel nervous?'

'Nervous as a cat,' I said truthfully. But I am bound to say that those few words with Burnett heartened me a little. There was something about his voice that insensibly comforted me.

'Sit out here in the sun till it's your turn,' he counselled. 'Nothing like getting used to the glare. And as to nerves, forget there are such things. One's just got to do one's best on these occasions, like any other—and one does it. Eh?'

'Quite so.'

There was a sudden roar. Jonny had lifted Shelmerdine over the ropes on the right of the pavilion, just missing the roof of the covered stand.

'That's the stuff,' said Burnett. 'A few more of these, and we might make a show yet. That fellow Morse doesn't look any too comfortable, though.'

He did not. That was true enough. Morse had survived some dozen overs or so by the skin of his teeth, occasionally scoring a stray run by a palpable mishit. Fortunately the other bowler was not making the ball do much. From the nursery end it was occasionally possible to get something that could be put away safely for two or three. No! it was Shelmerdine who was causing most of the trouble. It became really comic (or would have been comic if I had been in a more normal mood) to see the way poor Morse tried to manœuvre so that he did not have to face the pavilion end. He kept away from it for quite three overs in succession. And I must admit Jonny sent my heart up into my mouth more than once. He lashed out twice and missed the ball completely: fortunately the

ball also missed the wicket. Once it beat the wicket-keep too and went for four byes.

Morse hung on gallantly. But try as he would he could not settle down, or get the ball away. He just kept himself alive, so to speak, and that was all. But it was a great thing even to do that. For every now and then Jonny did get hold of one, and when he did there was no mistake about its travelling to the ropes or over them. He was missing fewer of them as he went on, too. If Morse would only hang on long enough, there was just an off-chance——

And at that moment his off stump went back and the bails in the air. As for me, my heart felt as though some one had taken hold of it and given it a sudden squeeze. I went quite dizzy. I do not believe I could see a thing until he had got to the pavilion rails.

‘Good luck!’ said Burnett. ‘Only forty-four more wanted. Keep your pecker up.’

The smile I produced must have been a sickly sort of effort. But I did my level best to pull myself together, though I felt my knees shaking as I descended the steps between the two lines of onlookers. Hang it all, I was not going to let them see what a stew I was in, anyway. I deliberately stopped and re-tied a boot-lace before I began my long journey out there. I seriously believe it did me good.

Jonny came out towards me as I approached.

‘You’ve got to smother this chap,’ he said, in a low voice. ‘Get at it before it has time to break. Never mind getting out of your ground. If you stay at home you’ll be beat.’

I confess the prospect dismayed me. I was not by nature that sort of player at all. I was essentially a defensive batsman, relying chiefly on back play. If I had to do that sort of thing, it was clear I could not last more than a minute or two. I couldn’t go dancing up the pitch to meet him.

Well ! I had to face Shelmerdine. And I knew, as he did his little three-step run up to the wicket, that I should be totally unable to break away from habit. I was : I stepped back and waited. And the ball came off the pitch positively like a flash. Fortunately it broke much too far. But I should have been hopelessly late if it had been straight.

It was only an accident that I got the next one. Somehow I stepped back and just managed to scrape it clumsily off my legs. It was not a graceful shot, but it served.

'Come on. One !' called Jonny. And we crossed over. I believe we might have run another, but he would not. Evidently he mistrusted my ability to deal with the left-hander.

As for me, I had scraped one run, which was something. Now, what was he going to do ?

There was only one more ball to come. I see : that was what he wanted me to do. Jonny gave me an object-lesson. He evidently found it a little too short to hit. He just stepped forward, in the most non-chalant fashion, and patted it back down the middle of the pitch. It looked the simplest thing in the world. Only, of course, you had to be sure the ball did not get past you : if it did there was no possible chance of getting back in time : the wicket-keeper had your bails off while you were still feeling forward.

But I cannot tell you how that stroke of Jonny's (if you can call it a stroke) heartened me up. I think he must have done it with a sort of exaggerated confidence, for that very purpose, and a sound that was very like a titter ran round the ground. After all, the man was only slow medium : if you made up your mind to do it you could get out to the pitch of anything he sent up, unless it was short enough to wait for, and there was no particular trouble in dealing with it then—so long as you did not try to do too much. That

was the game : get out and smother him unless you could lie back and hook him to the boundary. Only you had to make up your mind at once.

I had an over from the man at the nursery end, and began to get a little confidence. I could manage that stuff all right, I said to myself. Right hand, fastish, and not doing anything much off the pitch. I sneaked a couple of runs off his third ball through the slips, and played out the rest of the over without any particular trouble.

Strange, how soon one gets over the worst in almost everything one undertakes. I still did not altogether like the look of Shelmerdine, but I was no longer terrified of facing him. I watched Jonny deal with him in the next over. He stepped out to the first, in the same casual fashion as before, and stopped it. Then the bowler tried him with a short one, a bit faster, and Jonny stepped back and chopped it past point for three. He had a stroke of his own for that, not exactly a cut and not particularly pretty to look at, but effective enough. And I was over facing Shelmerdine again.

That time I felt perfectly confident. I felt I knew exactly how to deal with the fellow. I went out to the first one, just like Jonny, and stopped it easily. Then he sent one down well outside the off stump, and I left it alone altogether. He tossed up the last ball to much the same place, and I left it alone again. And the beastly thing all but got me, breaking about a foot the wrong way. I had not realised that he could make them come in from the off like that. Cunning chap, that Shelmerdine.

However, after that I had no further trouble of importance. I stayed on until we were within five of victory, and then fell to a new man they had put on at the other end. I was a fool to go for the ball at all, but I suppose I was getting over-confident. Stone went in, made a single off his first ball, and then Jonny

finished off the match with a drive that went crashing up against the pavilion rails.

‘You might have waited a bit longer,’ he said, when he came up to the dressing-room. ‘Great fun if we’d carried it through together.’

But on the whole, being naturally humble (as you may have noticed), I was quite satisfied with my small share in that particular victory. What with the things Acklom said, and Burnett, and one or two others, I am inclined to wonder that I preserved my sense of proportion at all. But I sincerely hope I shall never feel quite so nervous again as I did just before I went in to bat that afternoon.

Chapter X Which Marks the End of a Stage

I

It was a few weeks later, and we were sitting in my newly acquired rooms in the Temple on a very warm August evening. For I had come down now, and was reading for the Bar—in a very desultory fashion, I fear; while Jonny Waring still had another year at Cambridge, in which he was to captain the cricket team and play for the Gentlemen at Lord’s, and do many other remarkable things. As for Percy Cudden, he had succeeded to the Fleckney stocking factory, and was already full of schemes for working up the business to impossible heights and then turning it into a limited company and retiring as a millionaire to come and live somewhere within easy reach of my new home. London was the only place to settle down in, when all was said. So Percy said, as he craned his head out of the window to catch a glimpse of the river, glittering in the evening light.

All three of us, I say, were sitting up there, at the top of Plowden Buildings (and remarkably hot it was after

the sun had been pouring down on the attic roof and through the open windows all the afternoon). Just now it was better, for the sun was beginning to sink in the west, and we could look out on the green sward of the gardens below without being actually scorched, and see the traffic hurrying along the Embankment or dropping, more soberly, down the river.

'By Jove,' said the enthusiastic Percy, with a sigh, 'I do envy you living up here. Think I could come myself when I've wound up the business, eh? Do they take in outsiders here?'

'Rather!' I said cheerfully. 'The place is full of them.' Wherein, as a matter of fact, I was quite wrong. But I knew no better then.

Jonny was of opinion that a quiet place like that would not do at all for Percy Cudden. Percy must be in the midst of things. He ought to live in a big hotel, a caravanserai, where there were hosts of people, and always changing. In fact, he ought to be up at Cambridge. Greatest mistake in the world that he had not come up with us.

'That's right,' said Percy. 'I do like company, I admit. But you can always go out and get it here. And when you want to be alone you can shut yourself up and see nobody. However, I quite agree that solitary brooding is generally a mistake.'

He sighed, and so did I, though I was thinking of something entirely different from his trouble, I suspect.

'I'd give a lot to be coming back with you next term,' I said to Jonny.

Curious! I had never thought that I should feel it so much, leaving Mike's. The fact is, I am by nature disinclined to change. I have to force myself into a new path. If they had offered me a fellowship I make no doubt I should have accepted it, from sheer reluctance to move. I had got used to Cambridge. I had

made a sort of place for myself there, too. And now I should have to begin all over again, acclimatising myself to another difficult atmosphere. And as soon as I began to get accustomed (if I ever did) to addressing judges and chairmen of quarter sessions and other such fearsome wildfowl, I should probably have to take up something else. Life was like that.

‘I wish I could get some job I could do easily,’ I complained. ‘I’d be quite content to stay there. I’m not ambitious.’

‘Great heavens!’ cried Percy Cudden, vehemently protesting in quite his old style. ‘That sort of attitude is fatal. You simply mustn’t stay in the same place all your life. Try all sorts of things—something new every year. I simply hate this playing for safety.’

I dare say I felt he was right, even then. But at that time I was an unadventurous sort of person. I disliked trying any path that was not already well trodden. I shrank from even such minor adventures as a new collar or a strange sort of tie.

‘It’s all very well for you two,’ I said. ‘You don’t know what it means, but I’m a nervous subject. I hate making myself conspicuous.’

‘Then you’ve got to get over it,’ said Jonny crisply. ‘It’s a weakness, like any other—an obstacle in the path of progress.’

‘But suppose I don’t want to progress?’

Jonny’s brows contracted, for he was always rather serious on this topic.

‘You’ve got to do it some time, whether you like it or not. If you don’t progress in this world, there’s all the more leeway to make up in the next. If you slink into corners and hide yourself, like a partridge in a hedge-bottom, it only means that you are losing time. What do you suppose we are sent into the world for?’

'That's exactly what I have always wanted to find out.'

'To plug like blazes,' suggested Percy, still leaning on the window-sill. 'And go on to the end. Till you drop.'

'How do you know?' I repeated.

'Nonsense! You know as well as either of us.' Jonny took us up in his positive way. 'Plugging isn't exactly the word I should have used, but I expect Percy means the same thing. We just have to develop ourselves, here and in the next sphere we come to, and the next. Don't imagine we stop for a moment. And we must help other people to develop themselves too. It's all quite simple when you once get it firmly into your head. Just the parable of the talents.'

'Quite so,' said Percy, turning round from the open window and chiming in. 'Seems to me the gentleman who spoke last is rather sound. You've got to drop this nervous habit, my lad, or it may spoil your future. Why should you be nervous, anyway? Seems to me you've done uncommon well, for a start.'

'Mostly flukes. I admit I've had some useful friends. You see I just happened to get an inscription in the tripods that Wilks had stuck up in his room. And there was a piece of Pindar that Archer had been lecturing on only a month or so before.'

'Lucky dog! I suppose they gave you a first on the strength of those two accidents. How about your cricket blue?'

'Ask him!' I pointed to Jonny. 'He and Burnett managed it between them, somehow.'

'Good job they did,' went on Percy, undefeated. 'You did more than some of them to win the match, anyway. But that ought to have killed your nervousness. Seems to me you've got through your first stage rather smartly.'

II

Yes ! that was it. Our first stage was over. We had all passed through it now—even Jonny, in a sense, though he had a year more of his University career to run. But somehow Jonny always seemed more grown up than the rest of us. He seemed to know so certainly where he was going, and what he ought to do in any emergency, whereas we were leaves in the wind. Even Percy was but a leaf, though he made an outward show of resolution and independence. As for me, what did I know of the career towards which I had tentatively directed my feet ? Nothing—except that I should have to get up in court (assuming that I was ever employed) and try to make a more or less connected statement on a subject that I had hastily tried to learn. I felt instinctively that I was too slow for the part. It took time for me to learn anything. And every time that I thought of having to get up and make a speech a sharp pang of doubt went through me. Should I ever be able to do it—even badly ? Should I be able to make a living by putting a specious appearance on hard facts ? To my mind, assuredly not !

‘ It ’s all very well for you two,’ I reproached them. ‘ You know your jobs—such as they are. I mean to say, all that Jonny ’s got to do for the present is to bowl men out and hit balls out of the ground when it comes to his turn. And all Percy has ever had to do, it seems to me, is to exercise a general supervision. You are both working with your instinct, whereas I am trying to do something directly opposed to mine. Why I am trying to do it I hardly know—except that it was a sort of understood thing with my father.’

‘ You ’ll probably find it ’s the one thing in the world you can do superlatively well.’ Thus Percy, the optimist. ‘ You ’re exactly the sort of young fellow that one

reads about in *Lives of the Great*, who waits and waits until one day they bring him a brief in an important case. He mugs it up, and discovers a nice legal point, and his fortune is made. Lord Strange of Ashe would sound all right, eh? You'll be Lord Chancellor some fine day, my lad.'

'I'd give anything to be on the track of something I felt I could do, and enjoyed doing.'

'I don't think you get anywhere that way,' Jonny put in, frowning a little as though he were trying hard to peer into the future. 'Does you much more good to take up something you don't like—something that frightens you a bit. That helps the development.'

'He speaks as if we were all photographic plates,' I said.

'Very true. So we all are. And we want a touch of acid in the bath to bring us out.'

'I believe the old chap is right,' agreed Percy. 'A bit of misfortune now and then does us all the good in the world. One wants variety. I'm all for trying everything that comes along. Begin with the Bar, if you can manage it. I dare say it's not bad training. And then, if you find there's nothing doing there, try something else. Half the men one meets have begun by getting called.'

'I wish you'd come and take it up yourself,' I said. 'If I had a friend passing through it with me, I wouldn't mind so much.'

At which the two laughed, not unkindly. But the fact was that this reluctance of mine to walk unaided was beginning to be regarded as a joke.

'I don't know that I'll do that,' said Percy. 'But I'm not going to keep on with stockings all my life, you bet. I've got to go on with it for a bit because the old man went off sudden, as you know. But Lord! I mean to try a lot more things before I get through with life.'

And he leaned out of the window once more, as though the ceaseless progression of vehicles on the Embankment were a symbol of the movement he desired for himself.

III

There came a sudden ring at the bell. Electric bells were not then common in the Temple, but my predecessor had put one in. A smart rap on the door followed. I opened it, wondering who could be coming to see me at that hour. In the dim light of the staircase I could hardly make out at first who it was. Then I saw that it was Elsie.

‘Are you alone?’ she said quickly. ‘I—rather wanted to see you for one minute.’

There was always just a touch of the stage about Elsie, or so I thought. Perhaps it was purely imaginary on my part, but it roused some dormant instinct in my character. That slight pause, almost infinitesimal as it was, gave me a feeling of irritation. It sounded insincere. Probably, to her, it was perfectly natural, but it came between us, marring our sympathy.

‘Jonny Waring and Percy are inside,’ I said brusquely. ‘Not exactly strangers. Still—if you want to be private, I can ask them to go, of course.’

She seemed to hesitate a moment before she made up her mind. Then her voice changed.

‘Oh! good. Let’s come in and have a look at them, for the sake of old times.’

And in we went.

‘So here we all are,’ she said. I wish I could paint her as she stood there by the open door of my room. She was extraordinarily dainty that evening, like a Dresden china figure. Being a mere man, I could not tell you in the least what she was wearing, and it probably would not interest you now in any case, seeing that the fashions of that age were perhaps not among

our happiest efforts. But I have a vivid recollection of thinking as I stood there and watched her that I had never seen her look better.

'This is jolly,' she went on. 'Quite like old times.' And she moved forward and gave a delicately gloved hand to each, with a sort of girlish freedom that was rather charming. Both Percy and Jonny were standing up, of course, and both looked a little awkward. But not she. Elsie never could look awkward, whatever other misfortune might happen to her. But Percy reddened a good deal. You see, he had not met her since that day when he had waited at the entrance to Lord's, and she (like the Levite) had passed by on the other side.

'To think of us all meeting here once more,' she said. 'And me without a notion of finding any one. I just came up to see my little brother once more—and congratulate him, by the way. They tell me you and Jonny won the 'Varsity match between you.'

'Not in the least,' I put in promptly. 'Jonny did it entirely on his own.'

Percy had to clear his throat before he came in to the dialogue.

'We've been trying to argue him out of this false humility,' he said. His voice sounded a little husky then.

'He's better than he was,' Jonny supported him, still referring to me.

'The Stranges were always shy and retiring,' I contributed.

Elsie's face suddenly lit up, as it so often did when something amused her or caught her capricious fancy.

'No, no! You had the double share, and I was left out. A forward minx, they would have called me in the old days.' She looked reflectively at the gloves on her hands. 'Think of it, I won these, in a bet. No really nice girl bets. And a lot more, too.' She sighed.

‘All through you, Jonny. Did you know I was backing you? But that’s all a long time ago.’

‘That was Bob Sterndale, wasn’t it?’ I said, calling to mind a certain scene on the Aylestone Road ground.

‘Bob and I have quarrelled. You see, he began to lose my money instead of doubling it every few weeks. Something went wrong with those American rails of his. So Bob and I parted in anger. Rather sad after all these years.’

I put down, more or less, the broken sentences she used, but it is impossible to reproduce the effect she made on us. I remember that the other two watched her just as if she had been on the stage, acting in some play. I felt it myself. We were all acting, and it was a tragedy: somehow or other, dainty as she looked standing there and making play with her pocket-handkerchief, she managed to impress us with the conviction that there was tragedy behind it all. Treated in a half-mocking spirit, perhaps, but still tragic. Percy felt it too, I am sure, though he could not help playing up to her in the old way, just as he used to do in the dining-room at Ashe when she began imitating Mooney or another. He brought forward a chair with the old flourish.

‘Will your Highness deign to be seated?’

She swept him a curtsy in reply.

‘Alas, Sir Percy, Time forbids me to stay. I did but come here to say Farewell.’

She could use her voice, that sister of mine. Even I, her brother, felt a sort of constriction of the heart as she spoke the word.

‘How did you come?’ I asked prosaically, perhaps because I was ashamed of my emotion, all about nothing. ‘In a hansom?’

‘Yes. And it’s waiting outside, on the Embankment.’ The spell was broken. ‘Don’t you think it

was rather clever of me finding you in this strange place? I really did want to see you—for a few minutes.'

Jonny Waring and Percy stood up together.

'You'd like to be alone a minute, perhaps. Shall we go?'

'Not in the least.' She waved her hand. Once more she seemed to hesitate for a word. 'I did want to say good-bye to all of you. Lucky finding you here. Fact is, I've got a sort of engagement. Going to the Cape, first.'

'Touring again?' I was rather surprised. 'I thought you were going to come out in London.'

She gave a little laugh. 'So did I—once upon a time. To tell you the honest truth, I'm not—quite sure that I shall like the country, or the part, or the company.' Her eyes dimmed. You would have sworn she was on the verge of tears. Suddenly the clock on my mantelpiece began to strike. 'Heavens, I'd no idea it was so late. I must go.'

IV

It was Percy Cudden, naturally, who was at the door, insisting upon offering his escort down the old wooden stairs and along to the Embankment, in spite of her protests that she could manage perfectly well by herself. We were all coming at first, but she contrived to stop that. We gathered that she would prefer a word or two with Percy by himself. I thought she meant to make up to the poor fellow for her past treatment of him.

Their feet echoed down the stairs. Jonny and I were left alone together.

'I wonder what she really wanted to say.' It was a minute or more before I spoke. All the time she was there, I had felt as though she were charged with some news more important than what she had actually given.

‘What makes you think she had anything else to say?’ asked Jonny.

‘You had only to look at her.’

‘I did. I thought I ’d never seen her in better form.’

‘Yes, that’s just it. She was excited. I’m dead sure it was something more than going to the Cape with a touring company.’

‘Why? What makes you think that?’

I admitted that I didn’t know. Women were curious creatures, anyway.

Upon which Jonny began on his favourite topic again. Women, he said, were the great developing influence in this world. Look at the tremendous influence Elsie herself had exercised on every one of us. There she had been, a mere girl, alone in Ashe rectory, with Miss Mooney and a whole crowd of boys, and she had inspired every one of them with the desire of doing something big. Every one, that is to say, but me. Of course, being her brother, I had the misfortune of being outside the ring of this mysterious influence.

‘I don’t mind telling you,’ he went on, quite seriously, ‘that every single thing I did was done from that point of view. I mean to say, I asked myself first what she—what your sister would think of it. And so, I’m sure, did Percy, and no doubt this fellow Sterndale as well.’

‘And how about Reggie Hicks?’ I could not help saying.

‘I dare say she did Hicks more good than any of us.’

‘He probably wanted it more.’

We both laughed at this. And then we heard Percy stumbling up the wooden stairs again. It was always rather dark out there, and he came into the room blinking, as though he could hardly stand the sudden access of light. There was something rather curious about the look of him, I thought.

‘What’s the matter, Percy?’ I asked. ‘You look as if you had seen a ghost.’

He made no answer, but went straight to the open window in a half-blind sort of manner, and leaned his elbows on the sill, as he had done before.

Jonny and I exchanged looks. We saw his shoulders were shaking. We were silent.

Percy turned round suddenly, with a tremendous effort, and faced us.

‘I’m sorry, you fellows. Took me aback, somehow. You see, when we got down there, she told me she’d been married this morning, at a registry office.’

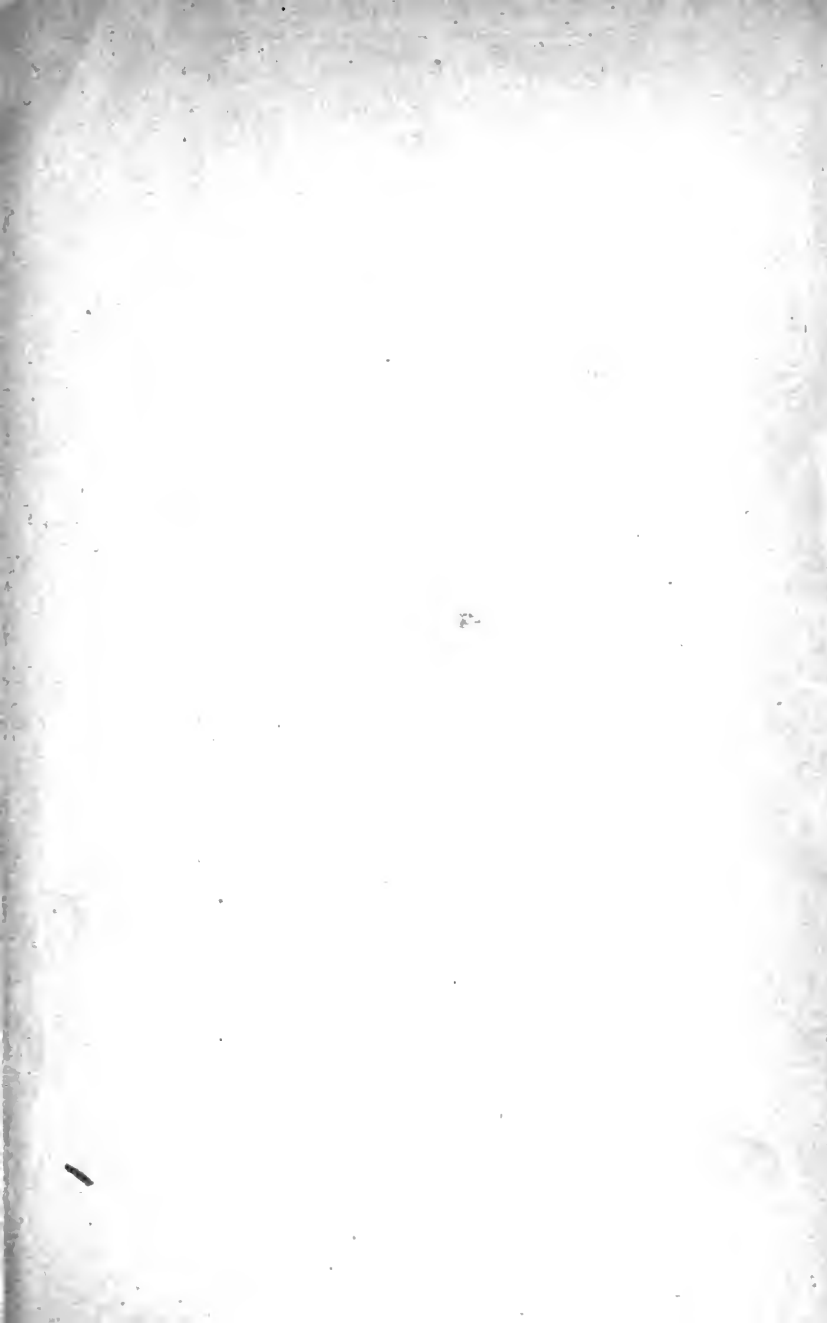
I suppose I ejaculated something.

‘Who was it?’ said Jonny, with a sort of ominous calm. I think I had a sort of presentiment of what was coming before Percy spoke.

‘Reggie Hicks. He was waiting for her out there, in the hansom. I saw him.’ And he turned to the window again.

Jonny Waring and I looked at each other in silence.

THE END





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